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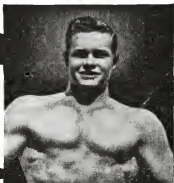


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Cup Winner

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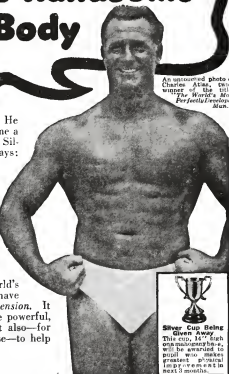
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Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay well for trained men. Fixing Radio sets in spare time pays many \$200 to \$300 a year—full time jobs with Radio jobbers, manufacturers and dealers as much as \$30, \$40, \$75 a week. Many Radio Experts open full or part time Radio sales and repair businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, in good-pay jobs with opportunities for advancement. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, loud speaker systems are newer Radio offerings good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises to open many good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in these branches of Radio. Read how they got their jobs. Mail coupon.

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Radio is power—it's one of our largest industries. More than 25,000,000 homes have one or more Radios. There are more Radios than telephones. Every year millions of Radios get out of date and are replaced. Millions more need new tubes, repairs. Over \$50,000,000 are spent every year for Radio repairs alone. Over 6,000,000 auto Radios are in use; more are being sold every day, offering more profitable opportunities for Radio experts. And RADIO IS STILL YOUNG, GROWING, expanding into new fields. The few hundred \$30, \$50, \$75 a week jobs of 20 years ago have grown to thousands. Yes, Radio offers opportunities—now and for the future!

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The day you enroll, in addition to your regular Course, I start sending Extra Money Job sheets; show you how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your training I send plans and directions that make good spare time money—\$20 to \$500—for hundreds, while learning.

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I am so sure I can train you to your satisfaction that I agree in writing to refund every penny you pay me, if you are not satisfied with my lessons and instruction Service when you finish. A copy of this agreement comes with my Free Book.

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Act Today. Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 16 years old. It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my training in Radio and Television; shows you letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a postcard—NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President
Dept. 9FD, National Radio Institute
Washington, D. C.



This Coupon is Good for One FREE Copy of My Book

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 9FD
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please Write Plainly.)

NAME _____ AGE _____

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STREET & SMITH'S WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

TITLE REGISTERED U. S. PATENT OFFICE

CONTENTS JUNE 24, 1939
VOL. CLXXIV NO. 5

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STREET & SMITH PUBLICATIONS, INC., 79 7th AVE., NEW YORK, N. Y.

THE ROUNDUP

WE hope all you readers will agree with us that TAMANAWOS GOLD, Kenneth Gilbert's new serial, which begins in next week's issue, is one of the most unusual and dramatic serials we've ever published. When we first read this manuscript one of the things which impressed us most was the fine feeling of authentic atmosphere in this exciting mystery adventure.

Gilbert has the ability to make his readers feel and see the far North country—we know that he is familiar with life as it is lived in those vast reaches beyond the rim of civilization. He writes with a sure touch of these far frontier people working out their destinies in a land where only the strong survive. We think this is understandable when we consider Gilbert's background. That he has been close to the people about whom he writes is evidenced in the sketch which he has given us of himself and which we reprint below:

"I took a running jump at things in a little backwoods settlement in Wisconsin, where a lot of good folks have seen the light of day. It was a break for me, perhaps, that I picked out such a good State. If I hadn't been born with an itching foot, I probably would be there yet.

"Irreverent friends say they are not surprised to learn that my early associations were with Indians, loggers, trappers, hunters, outlaws, and near-outlaws. They say that birds of a feather flock together. But the fact is that I've always been most interested in people who do things well, whether it be trapping a wolf who knows all the questions and answers, taking a canoe through white

water, riding a log down a freshet-swollen stream, or shooting the head off a partridge perched on a high limb in a Norway pine.

"I've always wanted to learn, and the way I like best is to learn from folks who know how; then trying to do things and learn things even better than the fellow who first taught me. If I've learned anything about the wilderness, the minds and manners of wild animals—yes, by thunder, if I've learned anything about life!—it has been just that way.

"That itching foot kept me moving. Within the space of a comparatively few years I've been a boomer telegraph operator, sailor, newspaperman, and finally a fiction writer. I've rammed around this continent some as well as the Orient and South Seas for nearly three years, Central America and Cuba, with plenty of trips to Alaska in between. I've had a lot of fun and maybe some adventures that are hardly worth telling about.

"Now I'm holed up in the Cascade foothills about thirty miles from Seattle, Washington, in a six-room cabin of my own making. There's a trout stream beside the door, and I can step out on the front porch, whistle for the dogs, and start hunting. Lots of black bear and bobcats about, and a few deer. Favorite diversions are fishing—there's a fine lake a quarter mile from the cabin—hunting upland birds and ducks, and trying to play the fiddle when I'm lonely. Only I'm rarely lonely. Folks have a habit of coming out from the city; dropping in, perhaps, out of curi-

osity to see if a hillbilly author wears shoes.

"Maybe, too, it's some author well known to Western Story Magazine readers, like Frank Richardson Pierce or Robert Ormond Case. One night there was a knock and there was an old friend, Edison Marshall, just back from Siam and full of yarns of the tigers and slaugdangs he'd killed.

"Or, maybe, it's an Alaskan like Jim Stephens, who was proggng around up yonder before the Klondike was discovered. Born in the Black Hills, he has a souvenir of Deadwood that I wish every Western Story Magazine reader could see. Believe it or not, he has the actual five cards that Wild Bill Hickok held when Jack McCall killed him in Deadwood in 1876! The original dead man's hand, taken from Hickok's lifeless fingers by Jim Stephens' dad, who was in the saloon when the shooting occurred. Sometime this year folks will be able to see those cards at the Hickok Memorial Park in Troy Grove, Illinois, because Jim Stephens has agreed, at the request of Hickok's nephew, to present them to the Park.

"And, just to settle an argument—or start another—here is what is in a 'dead man's hand,' a phrase well known to every poker player: Aces and eights and the queen of hearts. These are old-fashioned cards, unlike modern pasteboards in that they do not have indexes at the corners.

"A colorful caller who dropped in the other day was an old-time placer miner from Montana, who was at Helena when gold was discovered in Confederate Gulch and who still works a placer there. These are folks I feel flattered to call friends—folks who know things and can do things—and if I'm minded to extend hospitality by pushing the bean pot

forward on the stove and pulling the jug out of the creek, it's my way of showing that I feel honored. Maybe you won't find many of these folks in Dun & Bradstreet's or the social register, and they'd probably call you a fish-eating Siwash if you offered 'em a caviar sandwich, but they're the sort you'd like to meet up in the hills when the going gets tough. Real folks! They'll do to take along."

In next week's Western Story—

Only two chores remained for the Maverick's six-shooters before he wiped out the bloody memory of the night when an arrogant, power-glutted stockman burned his brand on the chest of an orphaned button and drove him out onto the far ranges. Justice and vengeance had been driving forces of the Maverick's life since that night, and the end of the trail was in sight when he rode into the evil town of Sombra. In GUN MAVERICK, L. L. Foreman writes a powerful, compelling novel of a man who had to fight himself before he learned to temper justice with mercy.

Old Shiloh Dixon had taken orders from a phantom boss for so long that most folks claimed he was following a phantom herd into the deep-cut canyons of the Corduroys. But old Shiloh knew that hard-case rustlers don't waste their time running off imaginary beef. Don't miss GHOST BOSS, a memorable human-interest story by Harry Olmsted.

Also on the line-up for next week are stories and features by Norman A. Fox, Dave Logan, George Cory Franklin, William Colt MacDonald, S. Omar Barker, and many other top-notch tale spinners—plus, of course, all your favorite departments.

MEN-Apply at Once!

If You Want a Remarkable Chance to

MAKE ^{UP} **TO \$45.00** ^{IN A} **WEEK.**

Running Your Own Local Coffee Agency

Over 200 more men will be given the opportunity *at once* to run fine-paying Coffee Agencies right in their own home localities. A remarkable chance to make up to \$45.00 in a week starting immediately. No experience needed. This company will send you everything you need, give you all the help you require, and back you up with its proven successful plans. A chance to be independent, work as you please, and make more than just a modest living.

Limited Number of New Openings

If you want to know whether there is an opening for you in your own or nearby locality, mail the Application below. By return mail you will be notified whether we have an opening for you, and if we have, you will receive full information about this Coffee Agency Plan. You don't send a penny—just mail the Application. No obligation—you decide after you read the plan. Don't delay. Send your Application at once.

Operate Right From Your Own Home

Everybody uses Coffee, Tea, Spices, Flavoring Extracts, and many other daily household necessities. They *must* buy these things. All you need do is visit your regular customers in your locality, sup-

ply their needs and pocket your fine profits. M. C. Ebert, Pa., reported \$63.20 clear profit in a week; G. J. Olsen, N. Y., \$19.85 in a week; W. J. Way, Kansas, with us 9 years, \$19.10 in one day; Mrs. H. H. Hosick, Nebr., \$41.75 her very first week; Mrs. Ella Ehrlicher, Mo., with us over 6 years, \$85 in one week. J. W. Willoughby, Okla., \$48 his first week. These exceptional earnings show your possibilities. Brand new Ford Tudor Sedans, or \$500.00 cash if preferred, are given producers as a bonus in addition to their own cash earnings.

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Just clip out and mail the Application. It merely tells us that you would consider running a permanent, highly profitable Coffee Agency in your locality if we have an opening for you. We will write to let you know if we have an opening, and will give you complete details about this exceptionally fine opportunity. Then you can decide for yourself whether the money-making possibilities look good to you. Don't delay—rush the Application at once.

E. J. MILLS, President, 9529 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio

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1 WRITE YOUR FULL NAME AND ADDRESS HERE:

Name
(State whether Mr., Mrs., or Miss)
Address
City and State

2 HOW MUCH TIME CAN YOU DEVOTE TO COFFEE AGENCY?

Mark with an "X" ☐ FULL TIME ☐ PART TIME
Full time pays up to \$30 to \$45 a week. Part time, either during the day or evenings, pays up to \$22.50 in a week.

3 STATE WHICH BONUS YOU PREFER—CASH OR FORD AUTOMOBILE

In addition to their cash earnings, we offer producers a cash bonus of \$500.00 or brand-new, latest model Ford Tudor Sedans. State which you would prefer if you decide to accept our offer. Mark "X" before your choice.

☐ \$500 CASH BONUS; ☐ LATEST MODEL FORD TUDOR SEDAN

4 CAN YOU START AT ONCE? Mark with an "X" ☐ YES ☐ NO

If you cannot start at once, state about when you will be able to start.

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•

The movies are not only entertaining. They, somehow or other, help people solve the problems that arise in everyday life. Literally thousands of letters are received at the PICTURE PLAY offices from people in all walks of life, telling how pictures helped to solve the problems of their daily lives.

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For all details on this contest, and sample letters, get your current issue of

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NOW ON SALE AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

THE DEVIL'S LODGE



By T. T. FLYNN

THE DEVIL'S LODE

BY T. T. FLYNN

CHAPTER I

PURSUIT

PASO BRAND rode out of Mexico, from down Madera way, near the Laguna Babi-cora, with four hard-riding rurales and a mob of Escobar riders smoking on his trail. It might not have been so bad if the Escobar clan hadn't been lords of that wild empire west of Chihuahua City and the frowning peaks of the Continental Divide.

A place where generations of ragged peons had taken the dust before any Escobar, and the he-wolf of them all, haughty old Sixto Escobar, gave life and death as he saw fit, had been no place for a lone gringo to start a flirtation, harmless though it was, with a guarded Escobar señorita. But who would have thought the fierce pride of the Escobars would have considered it a matter of death?

Or who would have suspected that the girl's two younger brothers, the twins, Jose and Juan, would take it on themselves to guard the honor of the Escobars by waiting in the moon-drenched shadows under their sister's window? Paso Brand hadn't.

It was perhaps justice—if you were an Escobar. But young Jose made the mistake of missing with his first shot and Paso's roaring gun cut the shadowy figure down before Paso knew who it was.

Guadalupe Escobar screamed behind the bars of her dark window—

and abruptly hell sizzled around that part of the town.

Dodging away through the night, Paso suddenly realized that the border was a long way off and the Escobars were masters of an empire in any direction. He cursed himself as he ran.

"You've done it now, you thick-skulled *boracho*!" he muttered. "The old wolf himself thought them high-stepping young dandies were where the sun came up! He'll have my hide peeled off in strips and horses pull me in two! Hell, Paso, don't you never get any sense?"

Paso's horse was at a cantina hitch rack on a corner of the plaza. Loitering Mexicans stared in astonishment as the gringo came plunging out of the night, jerked the reins free, pitched into the saddle and spurred away.

A rifle and cartridges were in the adobe room beyond the plaza where Paso was staying. He stopped there. Bedroll, warbag and pack horse would have to be left. He halted as he was leaving the room and jumped back for a canteen.

Tumult had reached the plaza when he got outside again. Men were shouting, horses were tramping. And high, thin, shrill, above all other sounds came the scream of a frenzied man's shout. An old man's shout that cracked with age and fury as it screamed death to the gringo.

That would be old Sixto Escobar himself! That would be the fierce old wolf whose rages cowed everyone! Death to the gringo! And

death it would be for Paso Brand unless a miracle happened!

The Border was a long way off. Scrub land and mountains, deep frowning *barrancas*, stony desert country with a few widely separated and hidden waterholes, would have to be crossed.

Paso was grim, unsmiling, as he spurred past the adobe houses, past the last of the brush and cactus corals, past the wildly barking dogs and the rippling shallows of the little creek into the open country.

They followed him, of course, as fast as they could get horses saddled. And with them would be the four tough little rurales who had ridden in the day before. If there had been a hundred rurales they all would have followed; the Escobars were heeded as far away as the city of Mexico.

PASO damned himself, damned the lush bright moon, damned the lazy sweet madness of Mexico that caught a man and held him until he got into something like this. And all the time he was riding furiously into the endless leagues of country stretching ahead into the northeast.

No use to head anywhere else. They'd know well enough he was making for the Border, and every lost hour gave them time to close the country ahead.

The only safety was the Border. Ride them out, ride them down, ride longer, harder, with less food, less water, less sleep. Keep ahead of them through fresh country where the word was not yet out that the Escobars wanted the death of the lone gringo who rode into the north.

A man would try a journey like that only when death was sweeping at his heels. And death was following now. Paso reined up and heard

it in the yelping cries, the pounding hoofs far back in the night.

They couldn't see him despite the brightness of the moon. But if they drew close, if his horse stumbled, if something happened to put him afoot, they'd have him there in their sights as plain as day. That moon! That damned bright Mexican moon that shone so brightly for lovers and equally as brightly for death!

No, they couldn't see him—but they knew well enough he was heading for the Ojo Azul trail and the pass through the mountains to San Miguel, and the hills, the grasslands, the deserts on beyond.

Paso cut hard with the rein ends and was thankful his horse was rested, fed, watered. While the moon hung high and the night rolled past, he had to draw ahead of the pursuit, so that sunrise would find him out of sight.

After dawn they'd fasten like leeches on his trail; they'd follow like wolves on a blood sign. And if they got him, they'd show no more mercy than wolves would show a wounded beast.

Paso spurred his horse. This was all Escobar land stretching ahead to the watershed of the mountains to the east and far on into the north. Old Sixto Escobar had never laid eyes on some of his sheep and cattle herds that ranged far in the north.

Hour after hour Paso rode, past midnight and into the chill hours before dawn. At last the mountains reared high and black beside the trail and the howling of wolves was the only sound.

The moon was down when he rode through the pass and took the downward slope through blackness. The faint gray dawn was in the east when he stopped for a moment to water his horse and fill the canteen

at a little stream tumbling out of the mountain.

Just before midday Paso looked back from a hill crest and saw a yellow column of dust far behind on the horizon. He smiled grimly and went on, searching the rolling country with red-rimmed eyes.

A couple of hours later he saw grazing horses with saddle marks. He untied his rope and rode easily toward them. A bit of maneuvering, a quick hard run, and his rope settled on a wiry chestnut.

The horses were part of some hacienda's *caballado*. The chestnut let itself be saddled without too much fight. Paso scattered the horses and rode on at a fresh gallop.

It had to be this way; a man could ride and keep riding, but he had to have fresh horses. You could be sure the rurales and those riding with them would change as often as possible.

Paso rode hard that afternoon and roped another horse an hour before dark and changed again. Rabbits were plentiful, and he was hungry. He shot the head off one, and at the first water tied the horse and had a tiny fire going in a minute. He cleaned, washed, halved the rabbit, spitted the pieces on green sticks over the fire. He watered the horse, filled the canteen, stripped to the waist and washed.

In twenty minutes Paso was wolfing the half-cooked rabbit meat as he rode on. Water, rest, food helped mightily the night ahead.

Shortly before dawn, Paso circled wide off the trail, rode back a quarter of a mile, looped his arm through the reins and lay down where the sun would strike his face. When the first blazing rays awoke him he was back in the saddle.

Never had Paso Brand made a ride like this. That yellow dust haze

back on the horizon was the last sight of the pursuit; yet he knew they were back there doggedly holding the trail, hoping he'd crack under the strain, rest too long or find himself afoot.

While he was in Mexico the Escobars would be trying to come up with him. They were that way, and the shrill, screaming wrath of old Sixto Escobar would ride with them.

A LONG time—a thousand years—later Paso came out of the heat and thirst of the Chihuahua desert to San Andres, on the Rio Grande. He was sleeping in the saddle when he rode into El Paso.

He stabled the horse, rented a hotel room, fell across the bed and slept the clock around three times.

So Paso Brand came across the Border after three years, younger than he looked, slender and fined down to a leather gauntness, with gold in his money belt and a fire of wry humor in his eyes as he looked back on the ride out of Mexico.

"Never again, pardner," he promised his gaunt reflection in the hotel room mirror. "Women make trouble and this last filled your boots for a long time. Wah! It looks good here after *frijoles*, *tortillas* an' dried goat meat."

A few days later Paso's gold was cut in half and El Paso knew a stranger was in town.

Near midnight of the third night, Paso left a saloon, sucked in the crisp night air to clear up the last two drinks, and walked around the next corner on his way to the hotel. He had not gone more than fifty yards when a voice across the street roared:

"Look out behind you over there, stranger!"

Paso jumped to one side and whirled. A down-striking knife

missed his back and slashed through the flesh of his right arm. And a man was on him in a furious attack, spitting furiously in Spanish, "For Jose Escobar, thou gringo!"

That cleared Paso's head faster than the danger! The Escobars again! He might have known they wouldn't forget!

He struck the arm away as the knife slashed in again, through the coat sleeve only this time. When the knife wrist whipped up for another try, Paso caught it. From the corner of his eye he saw a second man plunging in with a drawn gun. Two of them, and there was a third in the background!

CHAPTER II

A PAYING PROPOSITION

PASO wrenched at the wrist, whirled around until his back was to the adobe building wall, kicked the attacker away from him into the third man, and streaked for his gun. But the slashed arm had a cold numb feeling that half-crippled it. The gun muzzle was just clearing the holster when the second man fired.

Paso felt the slam of the bullet knock a leg back from under him. Then his own gun roared twice and the shadowy figure lurched back with arms flying up.

At the first blast of gunfire the other two men plunged away into the shadows clustering darkly here along the side street. Paso threw two shots after the uncertain targets. The buckling leg made his aim uncertain and they kept on.

Out in the street another gun blasted out. Paso, supporting himself against the wall, swung his gun that way. And the same bull-like voice he had heard before, roared:

"Hey, dontcha open up on me!

I'm trying to help you!"

"It looked like the moon had started raining greasers," Paso said wryly as the man came toward him.

"Greasers, huh? Mighta knowed it! I was standin' over there trying to make up my mind what to do when I saw the three of them ease around the corner after you. They looked ornery, like they might be stalking a drunk."

"Only a half drunk," said Paso.

"I didn't know, stranger. But when one of them went out ahead of the others, like he was ready for business, I yelled to you. Say, you sure exploded all over them! This fellow don't look like he wants any more of it."

A match blazed out. The stranger bent over the figure that had collapsed on the street. He whistled admiringly as he flipped the match away.

"I guess he *don't* want any more. You got him through the neck and the heart! One hole might be lucky, but two makes you out handy and quick with your lead, stranger. He's a Mex, all right."

"Uh-huh," Paso agreed. "He's a Mex. How about giving me a hand? He put some lead in my leg."

Other men were running around the corner to find what the shooting was about; and when the stranger's hand touched Paso's arm, it jerked away.

"Lead in your leg? What'n hell'd he put in your arm? You're bleeding like a butchered beef!"

"Knife cut," said Paso. "I guess I'd better get to a doctor before most of me leaks away. You can tell the law how it happened, I guess."

"I'll tell 'em plenty and lead a bunch out to find the other two! There's been too many drunks robbed and handled roughly around town lately, they tell me. A few

greasers strung up may stop some of it! Did you get a good look at either of the others?"

"No," said Paso. "It'll probably be a waste of time looking for them. How about getting me to a doctor?"

There was no lack of help, and no uncertainty as to what to do. Wounded men near the El Paso plaza were no novelty. Two of the gathering crowd locked hands and carried Paso around the corner and down a block to a doctor's office.

The medico took one look and got to work. The slashed arm was easy to sew up. But a big hole had been torn in the back of the leg.

"Stranger in town?" the doctor said. "Well, a hotel room isn't the place for you. We'd better take you over to the Catholic Sisters and let them nurse you after I get this leg bandaged."

"If he's short on money, doc," the bull-voiced stranger offered, "I'll settle with the Sisters for his nursing."

"I've got money," said Paso, gritting his teeth against the pain. "And thank you kindly for the offer."

In the lighted doctor's office he was getting his first good look at the stranger who had helped him. Iron-gray hair, a deep chest, a wide strong mouth under a crisp black mustache. And dark eyes that apparently were never still—eyes with a fiery restlessness that snapped and challenged good-naturedly from sheer force of habit, if a man could judge offhand.

Paso was weak, listless when they got the bleeding stopped and the wounds bandaged. He told them where his hotel room was, drank something in a glass that the doctor gave him, and let them put him on a stretcher and carry him through the streets to the adobe building occupied by the Catholic Sisters.

The doctor's drink must have con-

tained a sleeping powder. Paso was only vaguely aware that he was put between the cool clean sheets of a comfortable bed. The next thing he knew it was another day, and a smiling nun was waiting on him.

NEVER made the first day uncomfortable; the second day Paso felt better, and a smile spread over his face when a nun ushered the bull-voiced stranger into the room.

"I was hoping I'd have a chance to say thanks again," Paso said.

"Don't mind," the stranger chuckled. "I came in to say good-by and tell you I've got a job waiting if you ever get around to needing one. Gardner's my name, and I can be found over by Concho Pass, in western New Mexico. If you don't know that part of the country, anybody around Three Forks can direct you to Concho. I own the Concho mine."

"Thanks again, but the first an' last time I tried mining, I swore off for good. Pick and shovel work don't suit me," Paso said good-naturedly.

"I've got work for any kind of a man," Gardner declared. "And the better they like trouble, the faster I'll hire them. I liked the way you tied into those three greasers, Brand. Fast and quick, without stopping to see what it was all about. I'd like to have you come up and work for me, and the pay will open your eyes wide."

"When I get broke I may drop by," Paso said. "Trouble, huh?"

"Nothing," said Gardner, with a challenging squint, "that keeps me away." He caressed his chin. "I need a man like you, Brand."

"I guess that settles it," Paso decided. "I'd have had a knife in my back the other night and adobe

dirt over my face by now if you hadn't helped out. Soon as this leg lets me get around, I'll head for Concho."

"I was wondering if there wasn't some way of getting you to come," Gardner said heartily.

After his visitor was gone, Paso lay smiling thinly. Gardner hadn't been wondering; the mine owner had been pretty sure that he'd get his man by mentioning that he needed him. Gardner had a look about him that suggested he'd get what he wanted, one way or another. And the trouble at Concho couldn't be much worse than getting shot up and cut up here in El Paso.

Two days later one of the nuns brought Paso a small package with his name on it. "You said you didn't have any friends here, Mr. Brand," she said in smiling reproof.

"Surprise to me," Paso told her, squinting at his name crudely printed on the brown wrapping paper. He broke the string and unfolded the paper.

A keen stiletto tumbled out on the bed covers.

"That," said the nun, "isn't a very useful present for a sick man."

Paso grinned thinly. "You can't tell, ma'am. Got a letter with it, too."

He read the small sheet of paper on which a message was printed in pencil:

"For this I no use have. Jose's knife I carry for Jose's last wish. I will follow until I am viejo." It was signed, "Juan Diego de Escobar."

"Is your friend coming to see you?" the nun asked cheerfully.

Paso tore the message up and crumpled it in the wrapping paper. "That's hard to say, ma'am. If he gets a chance, I reckon he'll be around."

"That's something to look forward to, isn't it?" she said comfortably.

"It sure is," Paso agreed. "And I take it kindly he let me know he's thinking about me. That reminds me, ma'am, I'd kind of like my gun belt here on the chair by the bed. I get lonesome without it."

A shadow crossed the nun's face.

"Sometimes I pray that all men will forget their guns, Mr. Brand," she sighed. "So often they come to us wounded and dying from other guns, and then ask for their own weapons at once."

PASO laughed softly. "It's easy to understand, Sister. When you're a stranger without any friends, you get to looking on your gun as a friend. It'll never go back on you if you handle it right. And when a man gets on his back, blue and helpless, he wants his friend where he can see it an' handle it."

The nun nodded as she put the gun belt on the chair beside the bed.

"I can see how that might be," she admitted. "But you have just heard from a friend; you shouldn't be feeling so blue that you need your gun to cheer you up."

"Two friends are better than one," Paso said jokingly. "Anyway, I'm not sure just when my other friend can get around to see me."

When the nun left the room, Paso lifted the gun belt and holster across his lap, replaced the two used cartridges and made sure the gun was ready for quick use. He hung the belt on the chair where he could reach the gun instantly, and then picked up the keen steel dagger with a faint smile.

This show of bravado was something you could expect from a haughty young fellow like Juan Escobar. At least it was a help to know exactly what he had in mind.

Paso had recognized Juan Escobar as the man who had slashed his arm. His hunch had been right that he hadn't seen the last of the Escobars. The fact that Juan had come into El Paso with help, had located his man, and had waited for the best time to make an attack was ample proof that the Escobars were on a blood trail.

Now came this warning that another attack might be made at any time in any place. Until he was a *viejo*, Juan Escobar had written. Until he was an old man! Young, fierce in grief and pride, the surviving twin brother was dedicating his life to killing the gringo who had shot Jose Escobar. Paso sighed and put the knife on the chair.

"And all over a pair of black eyes where no harm was meant," he said to himself. "Paso, old son, you sure flirited yourself into a mess. Now I got to kill another one before I can sleep easy. And I ain't got a thing in the world against the boy.

"*Por Dios*," Paso muttered. "I'll have prayers said by a priest for you, Juan, my bloodthirsty young rooster, after I have to kill you. Maybe that'll make Jose an' Guadalupe and the old wolf himself feel better about it."

CHAPTER III

LEAD WARNING

A LITTLE more than two weeks later Paso walked to the stage station with only a slight limp and bought a ticket to Three Forks. He had a debt to pay. The sooner settled, the better.

He saw nothing of the slender, dandified figure of Juan Escobar. But that meant little; any passing Mexican, any one of the score or so of men loitering about when the stage pulled out, might be watching for Juan Escobar.

One thing he could be sure of—Juan Escobar was checking the gringo's movements.

Three Forks was far west of the Rio Grande, where the harsh rise of the mountains broke down into the soft brown swells of a vast plain. Dry grasslands and semidesert to the south, mountains to the north, high peaks hazy in the blue sky to the east and west, and a little river singing over a rocky bed through the town—that was Three Forks, and there was an overnight wait for the stage through Concho Pass.

In the morning the hotel proprietor was fat and talkative in the lobby. "Headin' up to the Concho?" he asked, squinting at Paso.

"Yes."

"Um. Aiming to work for Bull Gardner, I take it."

Paso grinned at the way they'd tagged Gardner's bull-like voice. He nodded. "Gardner sort of hired me in El Paso a few weeks ago."

"Um-m-m," said the proprietor, nodding wisely. "You ain't the only one. Better'n a dozen has gone up to the Concho since Bull went back. Half a dozen come in with him." He rubbed a broad chin that was smooth and pinky soft after a morning shave. His eyes ran over Paso estimatingly. "Aiming to work in the mine?"

Paso shrugged.

Another wise nod, a half squinting look, and the proprietor jerked his head toward a girl sitting on the other side of the low-ceilinged lobby. "Bull's daughter is riding the stage. He'll take it kindly if you put yourself out to help her."

She was looking out a front window. As if sensing Paso's gaze, she turned. Not too pretty, Paso decided, but she looked as if she had spirit and humor. She glanced out

the window again and saw something that made her smile.

"Kitty Gardner's some gal," the proprietor remarked.

"Kitty, huh?"

"Named Katherine, I guess. They've always called her Kitty. She used to live around here until her mother died eight-nine years ago, when she went East to relatives and school. She ain't been back more'n twice since then. I better make you acquainted."

Paso assented without enthusiasm.

The proprietor led him over and introduced him to the girl with a flourish.

"Miss Kitty, I better make you acquainted with this man who's going to work at the Concho. Brand's his name. He'll be glad to help you in any way on the trip up."

She was not much more than nineteen, and her eyes were gray, cool, estimating. Paso thought there was a lot of her father in the look she gave him.

"Thank you, Mr. Brand," she said. "What are you going to do at the Concho?"

"I don't know," answered Paso. "Your father said in El Paso that he needed men."

A shadow crossed Kitty Gardner's face.

"I've heard that men don't stay long at the mine any more," she remarked.

"Your dad did sort of hint at that," Paso admitted.

Kitty Gardner looked at him again. Paso could almost hear her asking him how long he was going to stay. If she had put it in words, it would have been a challenge, but she did not have to put it in words. Her look was a challenge.

Paso smiled. "Maybe we'll come out together," he suggested.

"We might—if you stay that long," Kitty Gardner smiled back.

WHEN the heavy stage lumbered out of Three Forks, Paso rode beside the lanky, grizzled driver. Five other passengers and Kitty Gardner were inside the coach. The driver was loquacious.

"Going to Concho, huh?" he said, squinting across his shoulder. "I reckon you're all set to get poisoned quick."

"Poisoned?"

"Lead poisoned," the driver chuckled. "There ain't many besides Bull Gardner that stays long at Concho these days."

"I've been hearing that," Paso said dryly. "Gardner must be plenty man."

"Friend," said the driver, "Bull Gardner ain't a man this last couple of years. He's hell, harnessed and whippin' the devil along."

"That," suggested Paso, "calls for more on the subject."

The driver spat and hunched over the reins as he talked from the corner of his mouth.

"Concho's way out ahead there to hell and gone, with the Border at the back steps," he said, pointing. "The country's cut up with hills an' mountains, and salted an' peppered with hell-for-leather gun artists that don't like decent folks."

"Nice neighbors. I reckon they've got to settle some place."

"They did," said the driver. "The Border's near enough for a quick jump if things get hot. Most of that Concho country is private pasture that's been took over by Shorty Baxter and his bunch."

"Never heard of them," said Paso. "But I take it Baxter and the boys are loaded for trouble."

"That'll say it a little, mister."

"Those Concho hills make a sweet buzzard's roost where they can sight meat in any direction. An' Bull Gardner squats right there in their faces, workin' a high-grade gold mine."

"You do make it sound kind of interesting," Paso grinned.

The driver snorted. "It's down-right murder an' suicide! Any other man but Bull Gardner would have packed up an' moved to other parts after a little of it."

"Gardner looked kind of stubborn to me."

"That ain't the name for it. He's bullheaded. He swears he'll work that mine until hell's out of firewood or his high grade runs out. When trouble busts, Bull holes up with his men and fights it out."

"Can't blame a man for that."

"There ain't any blame," the driver said, shrugging. "But the way it uses up men is a sight. Bull's payin' double an' triple wages to keep men workin', not to speak of gun fighters he hires. If he wasn't mining on a high-grade vein, there wouldn't be no profit."

"How about the law helping him out?"

"The law has wore itself to a frazzle. The county seat an' the sheriff is a long ways off. The sheriff can't stay up there in the hills the year around. Not to speak of posses getting skittish about pickin' lead out of their teeth to help Bull Gardner. It's reached the point where Gardner's been told if he wants to work his mine, he better do most of the worrying an' all of the fighting."

Under the grizzled mustache, the driver's mouth split in a meaning smile as he looked at his passenger.

"There'll be work for you up at Concho all right, mister. Week before last I brought back a load of

Gardner's help that had their bellies full of it. Not to speak of a belly full of fresh lead a couple was carrying. Anything in pants that'll stay up at Concho an' fight can get on the pay roll now."

"Fresh lead sounds like fresh trouble," remarked Paso.

"Nothin' unusual," the driver told him. "Bull rushed a gold shipment out with some of his gunfighters riding guard. They had a running fight with some of the Baxter bunch. Word was got out some way that the gold was moving. I brought down a couple of the men that got wounded in the fight. Bull couldn't stop to take them on to Three Forks with the gold."

"It don't exactly sound like a place for a girl," Paso commented.

"It ain't. I didn't want to bring her," the driver confessed glumly. "Bull Gardner don't know she's coming. He'd have rode down to Three Forks roaring like forty bulls to head her off. An' don't you think she won't be hustled back quick?"

The driver shook his head helplessly. "I knowed Kitty when she was playin' with dolls. Even then she had a mind of her own. I'm only hoping Bull don't jump me for bringing her up to him."

"He might wonder why you didn't say 'no' to her an' let it go at that," Paso suggested dryly.

The driver gave him an indignant look.

"I said 'no' so fast it like to choked me—an' Kitty smiled sweet an' said she'd hire a hoss and saddle and ride up alone. She'd have done just that, too. I know her. Sweet an' purty, an' Bull Gardner from bit to cinches when she sets her mind on something. You got any other suggestions to make about handlin' Kitty Gardner?"

"Nope," Paso said briefly. "I'll

leave that to her daddy and you. But I don't see where anything much can happen to her. She's a woman."

"And Shorty Baxter," said the stage driver, "is a rattler with his fangs sharpened by nine years in the Yuma pen. He come out sweated down to a sack of bones, a cough that sounds like a dead man, and poison and hate leakin' from every pore. The men he's collected around him ain't any better." He gave Paso a shrewd glance. "For all I know, you may be one of them headin' to the mine to get on the pay roll."

"I might be," Paso chuckled.

"Well, if you are," said the driver, "you know that Shorty Baxter is hungry for gold. And you know that Baxter's took a hate to Bull Gardner that ain't hardly human. I reckon it's because Gardner's shot up so many of Baxter's men an' kept the mine running."

"I don't know all that," Paso told him. "But I reckon I'll soon find out."

"You bet you will, mister."

THE miles rolled by and Paso pondered what the driver had told him. No wonder Gardner needed men. No wonder there had been a challenge in the man's manner in El Paso, and another challenge in Kitty Gardner's look in Three Forks. She must know what her father was up against.

Paso marveled that the girl should be coming in this manner, without her father's knowledge, as cool and determined as Bull Gardner might have been himself.

The rough dusty road struck higher every mile. To the north and south, and in the west ahead, the dry barren hills rolled higher. Now and then a faint wagon track cut off from the road, but a man

could look hard and not find much evidence of travel turning off the road to ranches and mines.

A bleak, barren loneliness seemed to blanket the landscape. Perhaps the feeling sprang from what the stage driver had told him. For this was outlaw country all right; this was one of those harsh, deserted, lawless stretches of country where honest men were not welcome and strangers riding through did well to keep out of sight until they knew whom they were meeting.

An hour before noon horses were changed at a small stage station.

"Anyone on the road ahead of us?" the driver asked one of the two men in charge of the station.

"Nope," was the answer. "We're lookin' for some ore wagons through today, but they ain't showed up yet."

The driver's long whip rushed the fresh horses on at a trot. Two hours passed before he said, "Ought to have sighted them ore wagons by now. I most generally pass 'em before this when they're comin' down from the Concho same day I go up."

"Could anything have happened to them?" Paso asked.

"Probably not," the driver answered. "But it ain't never any surprise to hear there's been more trouble."

Now the hills were higher. The ascending and descending grades became crooked as the road entered rougher country. In one place a rocky ridge studded with cactus and low growth thrust to the road on the left-hand side. The road swung sharply around the other side of the ridge out of sight. Paso was rolling a cigarette as the stage rolled abreast of the rocks.

A shot, a warning yell called attention to a man who had jumped up into sight among the rocks. His

yell reached them. "Pull up!"

Two other gunmen with triggered rifles rose up into view as the stage driver cursed and hauled back on the reins.

"Don't stop here!" Paso shouted. "Whip them horses up!"

"They got us covered!"

Paso grabbed the reins and the whip, and the long leather lash whistled out over the horses.

"Fight it out and run it out!" Paso ordered as he reached behind the seat for his rifle.

"Damn you! We ain't got a chance!" the driver yelled.

"Only three of them!"

"And thirty more maybe hid around!"

CHAPTER IV

CONCHO MINE

PASO was frantically chambering a cartridge as the gunmen up in the rocks opened fire. The lurching stage made a difficult target. They had a chance if lead didn't drop one of the horses.

Paso had sized up the odds before he grabbed the reins. The gunmen up among the rocks were afoot. If the stage made the turn in the road just ahead, it would put the outlaw guns behind and there would be a chance in a running fight. Just a chance, but it was worth taking.

A bullet screamed past Paso's head as he swung the rifle back of the driver's shoulders and took a snapshot at the nearest outlaw.

The driver was cursing and clawing at the reins; but he was rattled, frightened, and the horses were running hard.

"I'll throw you off if you pull on them reins!" Paso yelled as he jerked up the rifle for another shot.

"Yuh damn fool! Yo're crazy!" the driver shouted. "We'll all get killed!"

Paso fired again. His target staggered back and fell. One down. Two up there still shooting. They must have been so sure the stage would stop that they were rattled some themselves, or they would have shot at the horses instead of trying to knock the men off the driver's seat.

And then suddenly the driver dropped the reins and fell over against Paso.

"I'm hit! They got me, yuh damn fool!"

Paso's hand caught the man as he started to topple off the seat. "Ease back and hang on! We ain't stopping now!"

With a mighty effort, Paso heaved the driver around, half over the back of the seat. Crouching, with one knee on the wildly swaying seat, Paso lifted the rifle again, just as a hammer blow of fire grazed the top of his head and knocked him blind, dizzy, weak.

He felt himself falling forward toward the horses and tried to claw back on the seat. Then a terrific lurch staggered him off the side of the footboard into space.

The world was a blur of hoofs and wheels, gunshots and noise as Paso fell. He caught a blurred glimpse of white staring faces inside the stagecoach, and then he struck hard, and the road battered, pounded and tore at him as he sprawled helplessly beside the rumbling thunder of the heavy stage wheels.

The wheels just missed him—and then he was alone, half-stunned, gasping in the yellow dust cloud behind the receding stage.

Paso's first clear thought as he struggled to his knees was that he still held the rifle in a death grip.

Blood was running into his eyes. The dry gritty taste of dirt was in his mouth as he staggered up. But he could move, he could see as he

shook his head fiercely to clear his senses. The galloping four-horse team was still dragging the careening stage around the sharp turn.

The scream of a bullet sang in Paso's ear. He ducked and stumbled off the road. On this side there were rocks that had tumbled down from the slope and had been rolled aside when the road was leveled through. Paso fell behind a big boulder. An instant later the vicious buzz of lead ricocheted off the rock.

The stage vanished around the turn. The shooting had stopped. Only those three men had appeared. Paso swiped blood out of his left eye.

His face had dug into the road. It felt as if it had passed through a meat chopper. Danger was whipping his mind clear, driving strength back through his body. Still the guns stayed silent. Paso risked a look from behind the rock.

Two running figures were ducking around the shoulder of the ridge. Paso shot at them, missed and they were gone.

Paso spit dirt from his mouth and considered. The two men must be heading after the stage. That would be the only reason they didn't try to gun him out from behind his rock.

WARILY Paso stood up. The third man's gun did not open up at him as he made for the turn in the road. Before he reached the turn he heard horses drum into a gallop. A moment later the stretch of road around the turn was in sight.

Far ahead the racing stage was throwing up a dust cloud. Two riders were spurring out of a little gully in the side of the ridge and heading after the stage. Paso sat down in the road for steadiness, braced the

rifle, sighted carefully, squeezed the trigger.

He missed and tried again. This time the rider on the right weaved in the saddle, sagged forward, and held on with both hands as he kept going. The other man looked back and rode on hard also.

Paso stood up breathing heavily. Now that the furious strain was over he was shaking. The top of his head burned painfully. He felt the spot and found a raw furrow through the hair roots. Only by a fraction of an inch had death missed him; by a still smaller fraction he had escaped being creased and knocked cold. He smiled wryly. His voice came thick and husky through the dirt taste in his mouth.

"Maybe my luck's took a turn for better. Wonder if it's still gonna hold?"

In the crooked little gully that had washed back in the ridge, Paso found a third horse tied to a mesquite bush. Bruised lips pursed in a silent whistle as Paso surveyed the magnificent cream-colored animal. The horse had a snow-white star on its forehead, a snow-white stocking on the right foreleg. It was a stallion, clean-limbed, powerful, with unmistakable signs of Arabian blood.

"Some hoss thief sure made a pretty steal!" Paso muttered admiringly. "You're enough to make a hoss thief out of most anyone. Wisht I knowed your name."

The stallion stood with warily lifted head as Paso approached, speaking soothingly. Its heavy saddle was tooled leather. Bit chains were silver. Silver conchos were on the bridle. Mexican style *tapaderos* boxed the stirrups in front and hung down the sides. An empty rifle boot was made of the same fine, hand-tooled leather.

"If I was curious, I'd say you

might belong to this Shorty Baxter himself," Paso murmured softly. "But I ain't curious. We'll just ride on to Concho. Steady, boy, steady."

The stallion looked as if he might fight a strange rider in the saddle. But after standing a moment in indecision, he answered the pressure of the reins and turned to the road.

Paso thrust his rifle into the boot and put the horse into a long easy gallop. Now the country was rougher every mile. The road had few straight stretches. The stage had vanished and did not come in sight again.

Miles from the scene of the fight, Paso marked where the two outlaw riders had turned south off the road. Trees began to appear on the hill slopes and finally the Concho mine was not far ahead. The faint far-off trip-hammer thunder of a small stamp mill drifted through the hills.

Paso rode around the shoulder of a mountain, and the grade pitched down. The mine was half a mile ahead, in the mouth of a V-shaped valley that knifed back into the mountain.

A boiler stack spewed black smoke. A haze of rock dust hung around a small battery of mill stamps. Some of the mine buildings were rock and adobe; others were timber covered with sheet iron.

Surrounding the area of several acres around the shaft mouth was a triple fence of barbed wire. And as Paso came nearer, he saw armed guards patrolling the fence. The nearest guard stared in his direction, half lifted a rifle, then lowered it and waited.

The barbed wire came to within a hundred yards of the road, and under one corner of the wire ran a little mountain stream that crossed the road under a short bridge and

foamed on down the steep slope in a narrow rocky channel.

TWO guards were at the massive wood-and-wire gate as Paso rode up. Heavy ore wagons stood inside the stockade, but there was no sign of the stage-coach.

"Stage get here?" Paso called.

"Yep," said the nearest guard.

"Who'n hell are you?"

"I was on the stage."

The guard was a cold-eyed, wolfish man. He wore a saturnine look of disbelief as he eyed Paso.

"Only one feller left the stage. He was shot off. What's the idea of ridin' in like this, claimin' you're him?"

Paso eased over in the saddle and shrugged. "I ain't seen my face, but it feels like hell. I was shot off the stage an' fell off on my face. Don't it look it?"

"Kind o'," was the grudging admission. "Where'd you get that horse?"

"Found him. Did the coach have any more trouble?"

"Nope. One of the passengers drove it in. Bull Gardner furnished a driver to take it on after the horses was changed. The passengers wanted to travel fast beyond any trouble that might come up over the fight."

Men were hurrying toward them and the other guard was opening the big gate as Paso asked, "What happened to the stage driver?"

"They took him on to get a doctor. He was tore up pretty bad where the bullet came out. Chances are he ain't gonna live. I reckon you better ride in an' explain."

"Explain what?"

"Bull Gardner'll tell you."

There was an ominous note in the guard's voice. Paso narrowed his eyes slightly and rose inside the wire. More men had appeared. Most of

them looked like miners ready to go to work, but some wore guns and riding boots and had hands that had never been hardened by pick and shovel work. And when you looked close you could see the faint swagger that seemed to grow on many gunmen who lived always on the edge of trouble.

Paso reined up beside one such man, a small, sharp-featured, shrewd-looking one with red hair and a big gun tied down in an oiled holster.

The red-haired gunman took a corn-husk cigarette from the corner of his mouth and stared. "Some horse you got."

"I thought so when I got him," Paso said coolly. "Where's Gardner?"

"He's around. No telling where. Hitch over there at the office an' look."

A small sign across the front of a low stone building straight ahead read: CONCHO MINE.

The windows of the building were small. A massive door suggested a fort rather than a mine office. Paso dismounted at a hitch rack at the side of the building. As he glanced across the saddle he saw the small, red-headed gunman hurrying into the office.

The hammering steel stamps crushing rock ore to powder in the stamp mill filled the air with an unceasing roar of sound. Paso stretched stiffly and looked around.

The mine shaft ran straight into the side of the mountain. Here were racing machinery and sweating, working men burrowing into the rock. Here was high-grade ore that meant easy wealth. Here at least should be safety.

But Bull Gardner's gold mine suddenly seemed like fat rich meat out here in the wild loneliness. Rich

meat for outlaw buzzards to tear and pluck at their leisure. The triple fencing of barbed wire took on a frail and uncertain look against the danger that must lurk by day and night on all sides.

STARING men were beginning to stroll up as Paso shaped a cigarette and stepped to the office door. And he was blocked there at the door by a lean cat-hipped man, who appeared in the doorway.

"Gardner inside?" Paso asked.

"Who wants him?" The man had a knife-edged smile under a black mustache.

"I do," said Paso with a touch of impatience.

"Who'n hell are you?"

Paso drew a breath and shut his teeth over a hot retort. The Concho wasn't giving much of a welcome.

"It don't happen to be your damn business," he said evenly. "But the name is Brand. I'm the fellow who was shot off the stage. Who in hell are you?"

"Me?" said the other with a thin smile. "I'm Jules Horgan. I run things when Gardner ain't around. And if you're the hotheaded fool who like to got Gardner's daughter killed on the stage, you ain't wanted around here. Get going."

"Was the girl hurt?" Paso asked quickly, with a sudden wave of apprehension.

"No fault of yours she wasn't," Horgan said unpleasantly. "Get off the mine property before I throw you off. My mouth tastes bad when I look at you an' think of that fool play you made."

A dozen men were near enough to hear what Horgan said, and more were coming.

"Get a gun and throw me off!" Paso suggested.

Jules Horgan put his hands on his

lean hips and smiled coldly.

"If it's gunplay you want," he said, "I'll call some of the boys to cut you down and have it over with. We don't settle arguments with guns around here. Not among ourselves. We've got plenty of that to do with outsiders. Gun talk gets stopped quick inside the wire. Take your choice, fellow, and make it fast. I'm too busy to waste time on you."

Paso lost his head. The instant he unbuckled his gun belt and threw it aside, he knew he had lost his head. Horgan had been goading him to do just this. And the gun belt was still in the air when Horgan jumped at him.

CHAPTER V

PASO MAKES A NEW ENEMY

PASO dodged, but Horgan came down off the office steps so fast that no man could have gotten out of the way. Horgan came plunging with his fist cocked for a smashing blow—and if the blow missed, the weight of his rush would still knock the victim sprawling.

Paso did the one thing that gave him a chance. He dropped, ducking forward as he went down—and his shoulder and side knocked Horgan's legs out from under and sent the slightly taller man plunging on in a helpless sprawling fall.

"Wow!" one of the onlookers whooped. "That brought him down fast!"

Paso whipped up, and was on Horgan as the man rose, with a skinned hand and the smile wiped from his face. A smashing blow knocked Horgan down again before he could get his balance. But he rolled like a cat and came lunging up, spitting oaths.

The gun crease across Paso's head, the stupefying fall from the speeding

stage had taken toll. The edge of his own speed was gone; aches, bruises, weary muscles kept him from responding as he should have. His next blow at Horgan fell short as the man came to his feet, and Horgan's fist crashed into Paso's cheek and staggered him.

Horgan was wild-eyed, furious as he ducked and rushed behind his flailing fists. Paso staggered back from the blows, jumped aside to the edge of the crowd. As Horgan whirled and came at him again, Paso crouched. He came up inside Horgan's arms with a driving uppercut that snapped the man's head far back. Only Horgan's quick grab saved him from going down again.

Paso tried to fight free from Horgan's relentless grip. Horgan was kicking wildly and trying to trip him. They wrestled back against the nearest men, and a leg that was not Horgan's reached out and tripped Paso. As he went down, he caught one glimpse of the short red-headed gunman directly at the spot where he had been tripped; then he was on the ground and Horgan was kicking, stamping him.

A boot grazed Paso's head and half stunned him. He was done for and knew it as he tried clumsily to roll and protect his head with his arms. He would be lucky if Horgan stopped short of murder with the boots. He'd be lucky if he lived and came out of it with a face scarred for life.

A bull-voiced bellow cut through the noisy cries of the crowd.

"What's going on here? Stand back, Horgan! I told you no more of this! Who is he?"

Blood again smeared Paso's face as he got dizzily to a knee. Bull Gardner's big hand caught his arm and jerked him to his feet.

"So it's *you*, is it?" Bull Gardner exclaimed roughly.

Gardner wore a khaki coat, his head was bare and his face was as hard and dark as the ore out of his mine.

Paso weaved unsteadily, trying to catch his breath. He could feel fresh blood on his face and his head was spinning. Horgan, his own face cut and bruised, was scowling, panting heavily beyond Gardner's shoulder.

PASO grinned coldly at Gardner from mashed lips. "It's me," he said thickly. "An' this is about what I had ~~com~~ing for trying to help a lady. I figured I'd ride in and pass the time of day so you'd know I was all right. But it didn't matter, did it? Not even a man went down the road to make sure what had happened to me. Next time I'll sit back an' let the gun artists have the lady. Maybe you'll sing a different tune if the Baxter bunch ever get their hands on her."

Bull Gardner's look narrowed in sharp speculation.

"Brand, are you trying to tell me that was on your mind when you whipped the stage on and started a fight?"

"What else?" Paso demanded. "The driver had been giving me the low-down on this Baxter bunch. The hotel man in Three Forks asked me to keep an eye on the young lady until she got to you. What do you figure would have happened if those gunslicks had stepped up to the stage and found your daughter inside? Maybe they knew it already. She was around Three Forks long enough for word to be carried ahead. I saw a chance to get her out of it and grabbed it."

The black look passed from Gardner's face.

"I hadn't thought about it that

way," he muttered. "The stage driver said you lost your head an' brought on bad trouble when it could have been avoided by giving up pocket money and letting the stage go on. The stage passengers felt the same way about it."

Gardner spat and his face darkened again. "The Baxter bunch," he said harshly, "wouldn't dare lay a hand on my daughter!"

"Maybe you're sure of it," Paso told him curtly. "I wasn't." He folded his bandanna, wiped blood from his face and looked around. "Where's my gun belt? I'll be riding on."

Bull Gardner spread big hands. His eyes pleaded for understanding of things he didn't put into words.

"What's done is done," he said. "Maybe I was too hasty. It . . . it was a shock seeing my daughter when I wasn't looking for her and hearing how close to death she was in that gun brush. It upset me a heap, Brand. You can write your own ticket as to how you'd like all this evened up to suit you."

Paso studied him. Gardner's eyes still seemed to be trying to say more than he had spoken.

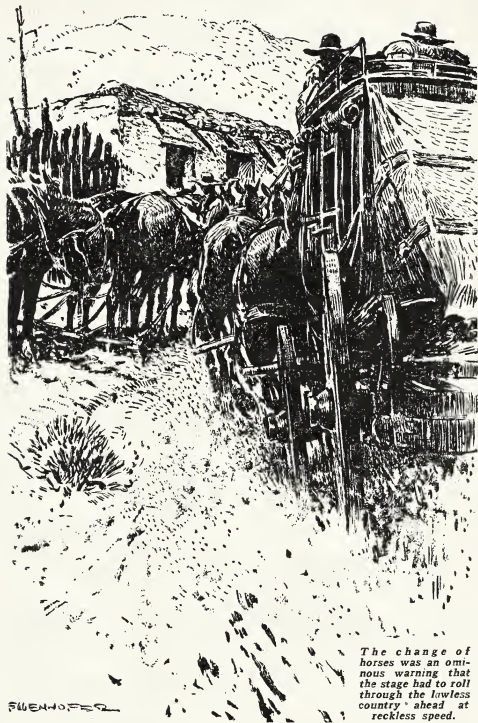
"I reckon that covers it," Paso said. "What's done is done. Maybe I'll have better luck the next time I'm jumped."

Jules Horgan had recovered his aplomb and wiped a smear of blood from the corner of his mouth. "This man," he said harshly, "rode in on a horse he got from those gunmen. If you ask me, they might have a damn good reason why they furnished him with a horse."

"What makes you so sure where I got the horse?" Paso demanded.

Gardner gestured impatiently.

"Horgan, you're on the wrong track there. Why should Brand have started trouble if he had any



The change of horses was an ominous warning that the stage had to roll through the lawless country ahead at reckless speed.

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connection with them? His play would have been to set back and let them handle it to suit themselves. Anyhow, I know Brand's all right on that score. What upset me was the thought of Kitty sitting there with bullets flying. But that's past. Brand, I hope you'll stay here at the mine."

Paso looked at Horgan, and then turned and found the short red-haired gunman in the crowd about them. He was thoughtful as he nodded to Gardner. "I'll stay."

"Good," said Gardner. "Pick a bunk in the bunkhouse and draw some blankets. Supper won't be long now. After you get settled, I'd like to talk to you in the office."

"Where can I put my horse?"

"Tony Ramos, the hostler over at the stable, will take care of him for you. Ride over behind the bunkhouse. You'll see the corral. Horgan, I want to talk to you."

A BIG, bearded miner handed Paso his gun belt and gun. "It shore did me good to see you almost whip Horgan, young feller," he said, smiling broadly. "I seen what he was up to when he started proddin' with that damn sneerin' mouth of his. When he don't like a man, he hones to get him down an' put the boots to him. An' you was smart not to reach for a gun, with him standing there easy an' unarmed. He'd have plugged you with a derringer he keeps up his sleeve. We're onto his tricks around here, but he's pizen to a stranger who don't outthink him."

"I'm obliged," said Paso. "I guess I'll be seeing you again, mister."

"Can't miss me if we both stay around this hell hole. Ask for Ben Davis if you got any questions you want answered. I'll be loafing

around when I ain't working in the tunnel on the evening shift."

The stable was a long, open-front adobe shed fronted by a pole corral. Tony Ramos, Paso reckoned, would be the slender young Mexican perched on one of the top poles of the corral, smoking a cigarette. He jumped down, took the cigarette from his mouth and stood staring as Paso rode up and dismounted.

"Tony Ramos?" Paso asked.

"You bet," said the other, still looking at the cream-colored stallion.

"Here's a horse that rates the best you can give him."

There was evidently a fair amount of Indian blood in the Mexican hostler. Broad cheekbones and the magnificent, rugged ugliness of his young face were all Indian, despite the lightish shade of his skin and good English.

"By golly," Tony Ramos said with admiration, "I never seen such a horse! I bet you had to kill Sonora Joe Riley to get him!"

"Hey! What's that you said?" Paso countered quickly.

The young Mexican pointed to the snow-white star on the stallion's forehead, and the white foreleg.

"Plenty people, I bet, know this horse if they see him miles away. Me, my frien', I never seen him before, but I've heard plenty about him. Hees Sonora Joe Riley's horse."

Paso whistled softly. "I've crossed that wolf's trail down in old Mexico. He's a bad one. Three years ago some of us rode up to a hacienda north of Culiacan a few hours after some bandits led by Sonora Joe had raided the place. I'll never forget what that bunch of wolves left behind. They'd pushed the old don feet first into a bonfire and there wasn't a young woman left on the place."

Tony Ramos dropped the cigarette and crossed himself.

"Ees plenty good he's dead," he said, reaching for the reins. "An' one less to ride with this damn Shorty Baxter an' make trouble around here. How you keel Sonora Joe, amigo?"

"He was one of the bucks who jumped the stage," explained Paso. "Are you sure Riley has been riding with the Baxter bunch?"

"Sure! Plenty people know that."

"That's one to think over," Paso decided. "Riley was a big enough wolf himself not to have to ride around under another man."

The hostler nodded.

"Maybe," Paso decided, "things got too hot for Riley down in Mexico an' he had to jump north of the Border and do the best he could. He was so ornery, I guess most decent outlaws didn't want him around."

"Maybe," suggested Tony Ramos with a flash of white teeth, "maybe Sonora Joe found a bigger wolf than himself when he met thees Shorty Baxter. Hee's a devil, thees Baxter. I tell you!"

Paso laughed. He liked this shrewd, cheerful young Mexican.

"I hear Baxter's all of that. But the devil's evidently met his match this time in Bull Gardner. There's gold still coming out of the mountain here, no matter what Baxter does about it, eh?"

Tony Ramos replied with an enigmatic look.

"Gold's plenty damn funny, huh? Makes funny things happen."

"Sometimes I reckon it does."

Ramos shrugged eloquently, half smiling, half in earnest.

"Gold's damn funny, I tell you," he said. "Ees gold what keeps Gardner here working the Concho. Ees gold what keeps thees damn fool men coming up here to work, an' new

men coming when the old ones don't stand it no more. Ees gold keeps me, Tony Ramos, here w'en I have nightmares in my sleep, I tell you. *Amigo*, if you t'ink I'm not afraid, if you t'ink no one else is afraid around here, you watch close for a couple days an' nights an' see what you t'ink then."

Paso smiled. "I'll do that," he promised. "And don't hold Sonora Joe against my horse. The *caballo* couldn't help who rode him."

"Me," said Tony Ramos, shrugging, "I'm not so sure about anything, my frien'."

CHAPTER VI

A TRAITOR IN THE CAMP

PASO laughed and walked off stiffly to find blankets for a bunk and get washed up before supper time.

The long low bunkhouse had thick adobe walls. The bunk-lined interior, with eating tables down the middle, was heavy with the reek of hard-working, close-packed humanity. The cookhouse was built on one end.

Men grouped inside the doorway broke off talk as Paso entered with his blankets. He looked for a vacant bunk with their staring eyes on him.

"Miner or gun toter?" a bearded miner demanded from across the room.

"Gun toter," Paso replied pleasantly, since the man was civil enough.

"Gun toters' bunks is nearest the door there where they can get out fustest and fastest. That top bunk, fourth from the end, ain't bein' used."

Paso looked in the bunk. "There's blankets and a slicker in it."

The miner showed white teeth in his beard.

"Pitch 'em out, stranger. He's got three feet of dirt over his chin to keep out the rain an' the cold. She's yore's as long as you last."

Half an hour later a great clanging on an iron bar outside brought a rush for supper. After the meal the men straggled outside, rolling smokes and talking.

From one of the men he questioned, Paso learned that in a few minutes a shift would come out of the mine and another shift go in. Two shifts a day. Bull Gardner was ripping the rich high-grade gold ore out as fast as he could find men to work. Now and then when the working force was thinned out, the Concho had to go on a one-shift schedule. All that sounded natural enough.

But in the thickening twilight, Paso began to sense something inside the barbed wire inclosure that was not quite natural.

Over the Concho mine, over the hammering little stamp mill, over the clatter of machinery in the mill shed, and the sight of many men living and working in one spot, hung a secretive, furtive tension.

Now and then men glanced uneasily past the triple barbed wire to the raw, ragged hills looming darkly all about. Twilight was bringing a savage, lonely aspect to the landscape.

Paso got a queer feeling that the hammering steel stamps were pounding a noisy defiance to dangers that lurked back in the hills out of sight. And a feeling that most of the men did not share that defiance. Gold had brought them here. Gold kept them here. But they did not like it.

A lurking, hidden, secret fear that men tried to hide was something new. Paso wondered what days, weeks of it would do to taut, raw

nerves. Hard-cased as most of the men seemed to be, the greater part of them evidently were not used to living by the law of steel and lead all the time. They were hard-rock men, used to sledges and drills, picks and shovels and the dull, heavy explosions of powder down in the mines. Not the whiplash snap and snarl of killer guns.

A gaunt, stoop-shouldered man wearing spectacles and a bookkeeper's black-cloth sleeve guards came up and touched Paso's arm.

"Are you Brand?"

"Right."

"Mr. Gardner would like to see you in the office."

THE stone office had an outer and an inner room, and quarters behind where Gardner evidently lived. Gardner was sitting at a desk inside a counter that split the office in half. He got up as Paso entered.

"Come in the back room, Brand."

Paso followed, and leaned his rifle against a desk in the back room. Gardner sat down at the desk. His mouth had a new hardness under the crisp black mustache. The snapping, challenging eyes were as restless as ever as Gardner looked his visitor over and caressed his chin.

"How do you like it, Brand?"

"Hard to tell."

"Don't like it, eh?"

"I didn't say so."

"You had a sample today on the stage of what we're up against all the time." Bull Gardner dropped a hand to the desk edge and drummed his fingers softly. "Just a sample."

"Next time," said Paso, grinning, "I'll try to keep my face from getting so messed up. It ain't much of a face, but I've got to look at it in mirrors an' I'm kind o' fond of it."

Gardner nodded. "You're not worried much, I see. I had an idea you wouldn't be. Brand, I'd like to make plain at the start that when I find a man I can trust, I pay him well. Plenty more than he'd ever get anywhere else."

"Gold seems to buy everything around here," drawled Paso. "What does all this extra pay get you?"

"Men that will work here at the Concho."

"Regular pay ought to get that."

Gardner scowled.

"It ought to, but it doesn't. I'm pretty much alone up here, if you want the truth. These men are all here for what they can get out of me and the mine. Nine out of ten would sell me out if they thought it would pay better."

Paso lifted his eyebrows. "That many?"

"This isn't a cattle ranch, it's a gold mine," Gardner snapped. "And when men work in gold, they don't give a damn for anything but gold. I'm going to have to put you on night watch tonight, Brand. We're short-handed and gold is piling up in the safe over there. The outlaws seem to have ways of knowing when gold is on hand."

"I got a whisper of it from the stage driver," Paso nodded. "He had an idea someone on the pay roll here was in cahoots with the Baxter bunch."

Bull Gardner slammed both his clenched fists on the desk.

"He was right! But I've never been able to find out who it is! We watch for days and don't see anyone around. We send out bagged concentrates to the smelter and they go through safely. But if there's bar gold from the amalgam tables hidden in the concentrates, chances are we can expect trouble. Bar gold is what they want, and I've got to

send it out. The smelter is too far to freight the ore out. We've got to reduce it to concentrates here, take off all the values we can, and try to get them out some way. And it gets harder every month. Somebody is tipping my hand right along."

"Ought to be easy to find who it is," Paso said thoughtfully.

"I'll pay five thousand in gold in El Paso to the man who stops it!"

PASO smiled wryly. "Gold again. I'll be saying it in my sleep. Every move that's made around here butts up against gold. You didn't offer me a job here to spy on your help, did you?"

"No," Gardner denied quickly—too quickly almost, Paso thought. "I spotted you for a good man, and I need good men. I'll be frank with you, Brand. If this mine was twice as rich as it is, it wouldn't be profitable the way things are going. I'm spending a fortune to keep men at work—and the damned outlaws are getting more than I make. Men who aren't as stubborn as I am would have closed the mine down and quit before they were entirely cleaned out. I'm running at a loss."

Gardner was blazing with anger. His fist clenched and unclenched as it rested on the desk, and his eyes were snapping with fury.

Paso looked at him and smiled faintly.

"Why not put it up to the wild bunch outside your wire fences? If I was leading a bunch of gunnies, with such easy pickings around, I'd take good care not to make the place close down. It'd be kinda like killin' the goose that lays the golden eggs. And, dammit, there I go tossing my loop over gold talk, too."

Gardner's reply was harsh. "Shorty Baxter would rather have the mine closed down, flooded out,

ruined, abandoned, and me run out of these parts busted, than get his loop on all the gold we take out."

"Something personal in it?" Paso suggested.

"No!" Gardner denied violently, but his eyes narrowed.

"And that offer of five thousand gold still holds?" Paso asked.

"I'll make it ten thousand," Gardner offered quickly. "Ten thousand in bar gold, paid over to your say-so in El Paso."

"Gold again," said Paso. "I'm gettin' so I don't like the sound of it. Mister, I didn't come here lookin' for bar gold. I had a tally against me to check off. You saved my hair in El Paso, and if helpin' you keep your gold mine open will make us even, I'll take that way. I always aim to pay off when I can."

Bull Gardner leaned back in the chair as if he were relieved.

"Fair enough, Brand, if that's the way you feel about it. And I'll insist on you taking the gold also. Your work will give you the run of the mine and any outside riding you want to do. I suggest you don't seem too friendly with me. We're on our own, pretty much, as far as the law is concerned. Murder is easy. Watch your step."

"I usually do," Paso said dryly. "I'll count on you keeping this under your hat. Who else do I take orders from?"

"Jules Horgan. No one else."

"Horgan, huh?" said Paso, touching his face reminiscently. "Friend of yours?"

"He does what he's told to do. He misjudged the way I felt about you today. He'll not make you any more trouble. I've given him his orders."

"That's good," said Paso mildly. He picked up his rifle and turned to the door. His hand was on the knob when he heard Kitty Gardner say in

the front room: "Good evening, Mr. Horgan. Is father in here?"

"I was just comin' in myself to see, Miss Kitty."

Paso opened the door.

Kitty Gardner was coming around the end of the counter. Jules Horgan was halfway to the inner door, waiting for her. Horgan turned as the door opened. The smile wiped off his face at sight of Paso. "We're looking for Mr. Gardner," he said brusquely.

"If you'd kept on coming, you'd have found him," Paso pointed out. He came out of the doorway and stepped aside with a wary nod of recognition at Kitty Gardner, waiting for her to pass.

But she stopped with her gray eyes on his bruised face; and her sympathy was instant.

"It *did* hurt you badly, didn't it? We thought you were dead and . . . and no one seemed to be able to do anything about it back there on the road. Father told me what you did—and why you did it. Will you believe I'm awfully grateful? No one else would have thought of doing anything, I know."

Paso smiled at her earnestness. "I'm glad you made it here all right, ma'am. I'm fit an' fine an' going to work tonight. I reckon we'll both enjoy the Concho a heap now that we're here."

JULES HORGAN was impassive as Paso walked on out; but Paso had the feeling that the man's eyes followed him out. And when the dark evening closed around him outside, Paso spat.

"Just comin' in, was he? And so far ahead of her she didn't see him until she got inside. The skunk eased in there an' was listening. An' I'd give a bar of that damn yellow gold to know how much he heard. Gard-

ner can give orders from now till hell freezes over an' it won't make that hombre like Paso Brand. Or me like him."

The mine shifts had changed. Food was being served in the bunkhouse again. Lighted lanterns on poles drove back the night inside the barbed wire. The thunder of the stamp mill beat endlessly over all other sounds. Lights in the mill shed and other buildings made the Concho a gaudy, light-spangled scar against the vastness of the night.

Out there in the night, death! And inside the barbed wire, a devil's brew of greed, fear and distrust. Paso grinned coldly as he strolled toward the mill building.

"'Bout as bad as the Laguna Babicora country and old Sixto Escobar's hate," he said to himself. "All this needs is Juan Escobar around to stick a knife in my back, an' hell would be calm and peaceful."

Paso spat. "And Juan won't be far behind. Paso, old son, you shore started gray hairs a-sproutin' when you got off the main trail down there in old Mexico."

Two hours later Paso was outside the wire doing night guard. Four others were out there patrolling the wire. Not many, but they could give the alarm and throw lead if anyone tried to rush the camp. They were afoot, so they could get back through the wire fast if they had to.

One of the other guards, a bow-legged, hook-nosed desperado who said his name was Tex and let it go at that, was resentful at being forced out of the saddle.

"I ain't been so much on my feet since I was a kid! Gold money an' plenty of it is all that'd keep me pushing my toes in the dirt all night long! It's a hell of a job! Don't get tired up long afore any of them

lights," he warned Paso. "We get shot up every now an' then in the middle of the night just to keep us on our toes. They tie their hosses out of hearing, sneak in close, fan a few shots, an' give us a horse laugh as they leave."

"What does that get them?" Paso demanded. "There ain't any gold in that."

"How'n hell do I know?" Tex said viciously. "But it keeps us shot up an' the whole damn camp worried up. Maybe they figure it keeps us softened up so we're easier meat when they make a jump after gold. If you ask me, they want the mine closed down an' strangers out o' this border country. Long as the mine is running, they never know what the law'll decide to do. An' they can't keep their hands offn the gold as long as it's here for the takin'. If I was sure I'd make more ridin' with them, I'd cash in here and look the wild bunch up."

"I reckon a heap of the boys feel the same way," Paso judged.

"I reckon so. Why not? We're all lookin' for all we can get, ain't we?"

"Seems so," Paso agreed.

CHAPTER VII

SHOTS IN THE NIGHT

FOR a time laughter and some singing from men off duty came through the roar of machinery in the camp. But outside the wire the night brooded under the cold bright stars. Coyotes yapped and howled in the hills. Now and then the far howl of a big loafer wolf drifted on the night breeze. The water rushed and poured in the rocky little channel.

Paso thought of Bull Gardner and his explanation of all this. The reasons he had given for the mine raids

didn't make too much sense. Since when would outlaws rather close down a mine and stop future chances at the gold the mine might produce?

Why should the Baxter bunch go to all the trouble of picking off the guards at night and keeping the camp terrorized? Gardner had said there was nothing personal about it. Well, maybe. But now out in the night beyond the wire, Gardner's words became even less convincing.

The more Paso thought about it, the less he liked the set-up and the chore he'd let himself in for. But he'd passed his word and it was backed by the debt he owed Gardner. If it hadn't been for Gardner, they would probably have buried Paso Brand quick back there in El Paso, and young Juan Escobar would have headed back over the Rio Grande to boast far and wide that the Escobar dead was avenged.

You owed a man something for saving your life. And when he put it up to you that he needed help, you couldn't shrug it aside. At least Paso Brand couldn't, even when he knew the other man was skillfully hazing him around to repay the favor in this manner.

Maybe, though, you couldn't blame Gardner for snatching at all the help he could get. He had a warbag full of trouble, and his daughter showing up the way she had, didn't make it any easier.

Paso wondered about the gray-eyed girl who seemed as stubborn as her father. Had she known how bad things really were at the Concho when she left Three Forks? Probably she had. Paso guessed it wouldn't have made any difference. Probably have made her more determined to come. She was that much like her father.

Paso considered her without any sentiment. She shared in the debt

he owed her father. Helping her was helping Gardner. By tomorrow she'd be out of the picture. Gardner would pack her back to Three Forks in a hurry.

And there you had a problem. If word could get out of the Concho camp about secret gold shipments, why couldn't it get out that Bull Gardner's daughter was in camp and fixing to travel back over the road on the morrow? And if word did get out to the Baxter bunch, what would they be apt to do about it?

Paso didn't know. He wished he did. He wasn't even sure that the stage holdup had any connection with the girl. Nobody could be sure except the men who had been there, and of those three, Sonora Joe Riley, and perhaps one of the other two, was dead by now. And if they hadn't known Kitty Gardner was on the stage, they hadn't had a chance to find out during the fight.

ONCE more Paso drifted out of the night and met the bowlegged Tex. "Anybody ever go out through the wire at night?" Paso inquired.

"Hell, no! You figuring on ketching someone at it?"

"I was just making talk, I guess," Paso chuckled.

"Your job," said Tex, "is to make sure the camp ain't jumped by surprise. With them damn stamps makin' so much noise most of the night, it ain't any trick for riders to come up in your face almost before you hear 'em. Keep watch on your share of the fence an' you'll be doin' enough to stay on the pay roll."

Tex was right according to the way he felt. The other guards probably felt the same way, and it would make spying on the mine easy. Information must be going out at

night, before the racketing mill machinery closed down. The guards on the fence might know about it and might not.

Paso had been assigned to that part of the fence nearest the road. The chances, he decided now, were not great that anyone would slip out through the wire on this side of the camp.

Behind the camp was the steep mountain, the nearly inaccessible little river gorge. Paso stood in the starlight and surveyed the lay of the land as best he could. A man would not get anywhere at night by leaving the camp at the back. He'd go out one side or the other.

On the right was a steep shoulder of the mountain around which the road had dropped to the mine. Hard climbing that way.

But if a man slipped out the other side of the camp, he'd find an easy downgrade running alongside the road for almost a mile. He could cross the road at any point—and it would take him down in a deep thickety hollow, with another hard climb to get out the other side. But anywhere on down the road, one could wait at night and be out of sight of the camp. The guard on that side of the camp was Tex.

The next time Paso met the bow-legged little Texan at the fence corner, he growled, "I've had a plenty hard day. Can't hardly stay awake. Any chance of a little sleep out somewhere without gettin' into trouble?"

"It's been done, feller, Gardner an' Horgan gits around now an' then to see how things is goin', but it's mostly after midnight. Git off somewhere now for forty winks an' you won't be caught." Tex spat. "If you kind o' drop out o' the way a little, an' anybody shows up, I'll tell

'em I just seen you. What the hell does it matter?"

"Thanks," Paso said. As he walked away in the night, his smile was cold. Gardner's gold could buy powder, drills, shovels, guns, and men to work them. But the one thing needed in a set-up like this, he didn't have.

Gardner had to have loyalty, and he didn't have loyalty and never would have with the kind of men his gold kept up here at the mine.

Paso stopped when he was out of sight of Tex. He waited until the Texan would be toward the back of the camp. Then he returned to the fence corner and kept on going into the night on the side of the camp that Tex was watching.

Beyond the strip of cleared ground, Paso vanished in the undergrowth, moved warily and carefully to the road, and kept going.

The camp lights dropped back. The sound of the mill machinery grew fainter. The cool clean quiet night enveloped Paso as he walked halfway to the shoulder of the mountain, and then a little farther, and turned off into the undergrowth. He sat down against a small tree and relaxed.

The stamp mill roar was a murmur now. No one could approach the mine from this direction without being heard. Paso waited patiently, fighting off drowsiness that came with the quiet.

Hours passed and nothing happened. Maybe nothing would happen tonight. Maybe he was on the wrong track. But if he'd sized things up right, word would be passing out about Gardner's daughter and the safe arrival of the man who'd stopped the stage holdup and killed Sonora Joe Riley.

The Border and the outlaw country were on this side. Anyone ap-

proaching the mine from this direction or anyone heading out from the mine would have to pass near this point.

HALF an hour later Paso jerked his head up as a faint sound drifted from the south. It came again. He eased stiffly to his feet, chambered a shell in the rifle, made sure his holstered six-gun was loose and ready.

A horse was coming toward the mine at a slow, cautious walk. Crouching behind a bush, Paso watched. There was enough starlight to reveal the dark bulk of the rider, who seemed to be peering into the undergrowth as he passed.

Paso drew a slow breath of satisfaction. He'd hit a bull's-eye. When the rider was past, Paso eased out of the undergrowth and followed. He shifted the rifle to his left hand and drew the six-gun. If he was spotted, gun talk would come first and questions later.

He had almost decided to hail the man and try to pass himself off as the one from the mine, but that was running the odds too fine that he would have any luck finding out who was expected from the mine.

The slow-walking horse moved on ahead toward the mine lights. The machinery roared louder. Then the horse stopped and the rider dismounted.

Paso stopped and began to stalk the spot a step at a time. Presently he caught the sound of cautious voices. He thought he could make out the horse, but the starlight was too faint to be sure. The two men standing at the edge of the road were invisible.

Paso hooked a thumb over the six-gun hammer and made each step with care.

The horse moved restlessly. Bit

chains jingled softly. Then the horse's bulk loomed just ahead, and an impatient voice lifted slightly.

"Who gives a damn about that part of it? You heerd what was wanted!"

"Sounds like a fool trick to me!" a second voice grumbled. "I don't know whether I want any of it or not!"

"You better!"

"Listen—"

"Damn list'nin'! Shorty knows what he wants, an' what he says goes unless you're willin' to stand up with gun talk an' have it out with him! You got that on your mind?"

"I never said so. But we got plenty to think of around the mine here. If *he* was to get an idea of this, he'd go proddy without callin' his first shots!"

"Tell it to Shorty! I'm only bringing you what he said. What'll I tell him back?"

"Anything you damn please!"

"That ain't what Shorty'll want to hear."

"All right," the other man growled after a moment. "Tell him O. K. if he wants it thataway."

Paso didn't recognize the voice. But then he'd heard few voices at the mine and these two men were talking in slurred, low tones. He wasn't close enough yet to have much luck with a gun. A couple of dozen steps more and he'd have a chance.

Then the horse tossed its head, snorted, changed position restlessly. Paso could almost see the pricked ears of the horse, and its eyes staring warily at the intruder slipping close in the dark.

Paso had been afraid just this might happen. He ran at the men, and a harsh voice blurted, "There's one of them in the road!"

The horse bolted toward Paso. A

gun spit livid flame at him. His own six blasted back as he jumped aside.

The horse flashed past like a destructive shadow, its rider lacing the night with a drum roll of shots and Paso firing back. And Paso was sure he hit the man, for the other gun stopped firing. The mad run of the horse went on down the road, and if the rider had been knocked out of the saddle he left no sign of it.

PASO had jumped to the edge of the undergrowth; now with his gun almost empty, he crouched for half a dozen breaths, waiting for the second man to show his hand.

But the second man had vanished. The shattering reports of the guns had covered his movements. Ears ringing with gunfire echoes and the pound of the retreating horse, Paso could catch no sign of the man. He might be a dozen feet away or a dozen yards away.

Silently Paso cursed himself for a weakness he never had been able to help. He could have put lead in the running horse. But he'd never yet shot a horse down to get at the rider. Something always stopped him. At the moment of firing he would always think that the horse couldn't help its rider and didn't deserve killing, and he'd try to get the rider instead.

Quietly Paso reloaded. He moved toward the spot where the two men had been standing, and nothing happened. Now the horse was almost out of hearing. The noise of the mine machinery drifted clearly once more. The camp would have heard the shooting. The guards, Gardner, some of the men would be out to see what had happened.

If that second man wasn't hiding nearby, he was making his way through the undergrowth back to camp. Paso turned toward camp and ran hard on the road. This way, running fast, he still had a chance to get back to the wire before the fellow slipped through.

Paso was panting when he reached the belt of cleared ground outside the wire. The twinkling mine lights looked close and bright, and the unending hammer of the stamps was loud and friendly as Paso cut over from the road toward the wire.

Tex would be there in the darkness somewhere, and other men, too. Paso was halfway across the cleared space when a gun opened up behind him. A shout that followed a burst of two shots rang loudly and clearly. "There he is! Get him!"

The gun opened up again. The man who was firing it had run out of the undergrowth as Paso cut over the open ground from the road. It was probably one of the guards.

"Tex!" Paso yelled. "That you, Tex?"

A bullet whistled past his ear. He fired back and retreated toward the wire. The other man came on after him.

Paso damned the night that hid faces and got everything mixed up like this. The man they wanted would dodge away and get back safely into camp. Just then a second gun farther back in the cleared swath opened up in Paso's direction, what he threatened.

WEARING, Paso ran toward the wire. He was challenged loudly: "I see yuh comin'! Speak out! Who is it?" It was Tex standing near the wire.

"Don't shoot!" Paso called back. "This is Brand!"

"Come up an' show yourself, Brand!"

"I'm after a fellow who met someone down the road! There's a chance to grab him if he ain't got back already!"

"Who did that shootin' down the road?" Tex demanded, as Paso came up.

"I did," Paso panted. "Two of them was talking. One got away on a horse. The other came back here. I'm trying to head him off!"

Tex moved close and his gun shoved against Paso's side.

"I heard you comin' at a fast run," Tex said coldly. "But damned if it looked like you was followin' anybody! Who was it came after you with a gun?"

"Take that gun out of my ribs!" Paso said violently. "I thought it might be you, not knowing who you was shooting at! Who went out there?"

Tex jabbed harder. "Drop them guns quick, Brand! I ain't takin' chances!"

"You fool!" Paso raged. "I haven't got time to mess up in a mistake like this!"

"Who said it was a mistake? Are you gonna drop them guns an' reach up? Last chances!"

The six-gun and rifle hit the ground by Paso's feet. He lifted his hands. Tex was a man to do just what he threatened.

"I got him!" Tex yelled. "Over here! Hold off on that shootin'!"

Now men were running toward the spot inside the wire. The one who had shot at Paso came running across the cleared ground, panting: "Hold him! I got him cold!"

"What it's all about?" Tex demanded.

The man plunged up to them. He was short like Tex. He gasped for

breath, before biting out:

"I follered him down the road to where he made a talk with one of the Baxter bunch! They heard me move an' started to shoot! The Baxter one hightailed off on a hoss! I chased this feller back here! Who'n hell is he, anyway?"

"Brand!" Tex answered. "The one who come in this afternoon an' had a fight with Horgan!"

"I mighta knowed it! He looked wrong when he rode that hoss in! The talk that started about him hit the nail on the head, didn't it? Hell, we might as well kill him right now an' get it over with! The men'll hang him for pullin' a trick like this."

Plain enough now, that voice. Paso made him out as the small, shrewd-faced, red-haired man who had tripped him during that fight with Jules Horgan. The red-haired man was set for a killing before others ducking through the triple wire fencing got to them.

CHAPTER VIII

LYNCH TALK

WITH Tex's gun hard against his side, Paso tensed to make a fight of it. At that moment Bull Gardner's shout lifted a few yards away.

"What's all this about? What've you men got there?"

The redhead swore under his breath and hesitated. That instant of waiting was enough for Bull Gardner to reach them.

Tex explained to Gardner.

"Got a hombre who slipped down the road for a talk with one of the Baxter bunch. Sandy Cole here caught him at it an' chased him back. I collared him when he ran up. It's Brand, the one that was

put watchin' the wire out there along the road!"

Bull Gardner's bawl of anger blasted over them. "Brand? Darnit, it'll go hard if it's so! Brand, what about it?"

"A damn lie an' a slick trick, I'll give him that!" Paso bit back. "I was the one who caught him talking to the Baxter man! When the shooting down the road was over, the Baxter man got away on his horse an' I headed back fast to the wire to stop the feller who went out from the mine on foot. He beat me back an' turned the dirt on me!"

A dozen men were swarming through the wire to the spot and more were coming. Armed men, muttering with anger as they heard what had happened.

"String the dirty pup up!" one called out.

"Y'eah, somebody get a rope!"

"Never mind talking about a rope!" Gardner ordered. "There won't be anybody strung up before I know who's guilty! An' then I'm man enough to hand out all that's needed!"

Gardner spat. His voice grew ugly.

"We know damn well someone here's guilty. But one of you ain't. Which one?"

"How much proof you got to have?" the red-haired Cole asked, complainingly. "Me, I've been scoutin' outside the wire night after night. Tex told me tonight he seen someone sneakin' off down the road. So I follered to see what was up! And when I butted into them an' chased the feller back here to camp, an' fanned him right up to the wire with my gun, what else do yuh want? Tex'll tell you how I follered Brand. Wasn't that you shootin' at him off to the left there, Mr. Gardner?"

"Yes, it was," Gardner assented

grimly. "Tex, how about this story?"

"You heard it," Tex said readily. "Cole an' I were hunkered down over there near the road havin' a smoke, an' I heard someone sneakin' past down the road. Cole said he'd look into it an' followed. I didn't have no idea it was Brand. Just before that, Brand had told me he was plenty tired out an' might be ketching himself a little sleep. It looked to me like maybe someone had sneaked out his side of the fence."

"Asleep?" Gardner said angrily. "While he was supposed to be doing guard on the fence! Brand, is that true?"

"I did talk of some sleep," Paso admitted. "But I was laying to move on down the road and see what might happen tonight. And plenty happened—the way I told it. You've just heard two of the slickest liars that ever thought fast. They're pulling together like a matched team on it, so both must have had a hand in it!"

"I've kilt men for callin' me less than a liar!" warned Tex past clenched teeth. "An' right here's where—"

"Don't throw that gun on him!" Gardner blared.

"Put a gun in my hand and give him a chance!" Paso invited. "They've got one yarn. I've got another. We'll see who's right!"

A man in the back of the gathering crowd of miners called: "That's just a slick trick to get him a gun an' a chance to run for it! Hell, didn't he ride an outlaw hoss in here today? Ain't it plain them gunmen this afternoon give him a horse to ride in here an' get set for a dirty trick? An' the first night he goes to work an' does it!"

"Pete Jenson's went for a rope!" another one called.

THEY were a dark, uneasy mass of angered men crowding close. Nerves were keyed up, tempers flaring. A few more of the right words would set them off like sparks in an open can of blasting powder.

Paso had seen crowds go out of control before. He'd come out of Mexico ahead of a mob that had been inflamed by the Escobars. Now two men that this crowd knew were calmly swearing his life away.

He'd gotten the information that Bull Gardner wanted—and the pay was being tendered in death instead of gold. The grim humor of it made Paso smile bitterly while his mind raced.

He could see there was not a chance of making a break. He didn't want to, anyway. Running away would only mark him with the guilt he was denying. He had to talk them out of it—a stranger's word against that of two men who had been among them day after day. And the ugly mood of the listeners made that almost impossible.

Paso lifted his voice. "Anybody here who don't want to see justice done?"

"We'll give you justice!" Sandy Cole snapped from where he stood at Gardner's elbow.

But other men called, "Sure, we want the right man!"

"What do yuh call justice, stranger?"

"If you was innocent, you'd get all the chance you needed!"

"All right," said Paso. "I only reached your damn mine late this afternoon. I came from El Paso where I've been laid up in bed for weeks. Gardner himself asked me in El Paso to come here and take a job. I never heard of this mine until he spoke to me about it. Gardner, how about it?"

"They're fair facts and right," Gardner admitted. "I was the one who met you an' got you to come here."

"If I rode into camp and made a deal in a few hours with somebody outside of camp," Paso asked ironically, "then who in the hell has been selling out to the Baxter bunch before I showed up? You can't pin dirt on me that was done while I was laid up helpless in El Paso!"

The silence that followed might have meant anything. The ugly mood of the crowd was still heavy, electric.

Tex broke the silence with a brittle challenge. "We're talkin' about tonight! An' there ain't any—"

"Shut up!" Bull Gardner told his hired gunman with grim finality. "I'm thinking about more than tonight! Brand is right! Plenty happened around here before I ever bumped into him in El Paso. He couldn't have had a hand in any of that! It's been going on all the time. Common sense says what was done tonight wasn't done by a new hand at it! I should have thought of that!"

"That's straight thinking, boss." A calm voice behind Gardner said, "Brand would have been a fool to have rode that horse into camp here if he was guilty of anything. He could have turned the horse loose a couple of miles away an' walked in after dark. I've noticed it's most generally the innocent man who looks worse when there's some slick lying going on."

That voice belonged to Ben Davis, the big good-natured bearded miner who had been friendly to Paso after the fight with Jules Horgan. And Davis had struck the mood of the crowd, or at least found men who respected his way of thinking.

"Davis is right!"

"Sure thing," another agreed. "We ain't gettin' justice done hangin' this new man. Maybe he ain't any good, but he sounds good the way he explains this."

"Is anybody callin' me a liar?" Sandy Cole demanded angrily.

"Didn't you hear?" said Paso. "I called you an' your side-kick both liars! I'll say it again an' back it up with a gun!"

"None of that, I said!" Bull Gardner exploded. "You all know the rule against gunplay here among ourselves! Cole, Tex—you two put those guns up and get away from Brand! There's been a mix-up here that won't be settled with two different sets of stories. So I'm going to call it all off. Nobody got hurt. We'll go back to my orders that nobody goes outside the wire at night. That goes for the three of you—Brand, Tex, Cole! If anyone, or all of you, don't like it, I'll pay off tonight or tomorrow and you can get going!"

"Suits me," said Paso curtly.

"It don't suit me," said Sandy Cole shortly. "But I'm staying just to see this straightened out."

"Me, too," said Tex sourly.

"All of you back inside the wire then," Gardner ordered. "You three men, too. I'll put new guards out tonight in your places. Back in, men. It's all over."

"The hell it's over!" someone said caustically. "Them three'll take care of that! It oughta be good when they pay each other off!"

CHAPTER IX

A DEATH NOTICE

GARDNER must have had his reasons for not asking further questions at once. Paso expected them, but the mine owner said nothing more to him. And the

crowd broke up, seemingly to agree with the man who expected more trouble between Paso and the other two.

Tex and Sandy Cole stalked off toward the bunkhouse. Big Ben Davis fell into step beside Paso.

"Plenty of trouble, huh, Brand?"

"Seems so," Paso agreed. "Thanks for speakin' up. I needed a good word."

"I figured so," Ben Davis said laconically. "For a minute I wondered if anybody would be able to stop it in time." He spat. "I knowed where the truth was as soon as I found who was callin' the other fellow a liar. Ain't this camp in a dirty mess? One of these nights hell is gonna bust right through that fancy fence wire an' clean everything out."

"Got any reason for being so sure about it?"

"Just the way things is going, my friend. Word has been sent in time and again that any man working for Bull Gardner is cold meat if he's caught outside the camp. I've got a hunch that Shorty Baxter is trying to make the place so unhealthy that Gardner'll find himself short of men some week. Then it'll happen."

"It ought to be something to write home about if it does happen," Paso said thoughtfully.

"Don't be afeered it won't," Ben Davis said confidently. "I look for Shorty Baxter to try and bust open the powder house and blow up the mine. And I'm only hoping I ain't back in the tunnel when it happens. I'm a hard-rock man, but I don't hanker to lay in seep water an' pitch-black cold inside a mountain while I take a week or so to die. An' it'll be just my luck to do so. This is my day off, but I go back on the night shift tomorrow. You

didn't hear what was said down the road there to the Baxter man, did you?"

"I didn't get close enough to hear much of anything," Paso said briefly.

Ben Davis hesitated.

"What I'm going to say now ain't any of my business, Brand. You probably know it already. But if I was you, I'd climb that big purty-lookin' stallion you rode in today an' leave. I'd do it tonight. I'd do it as fast as I could hang a saddle on that hoss. You've got two hard an' ornery hombres layin' for you now. A man can't watch his back twenty-four hours a day."

"I'll be a fool not to leave," Paso agreed soberly. "But I'm staying over a little to see what happens. Chances are they won't make a move tonight while I'm catchin' a little sleep in the bunkhouse. Everybody'll be watchin' for them to try it. And tomorrow's another day."

"Uh-huh," Ben Davis agreed. "And around here a new day is apt to be more trouble. Well, if you stay, your eyes is wide open about it."

PASO was weary and stiff when he entered the bunkhouse where thick-muscled miners were snoring heavily. He put his rifle and gun belt on the inside of his bunk; and when he was in that top bunk under the blankets, he slid the keen stiletto sent him by Juan Diego de Escobar down beside his leg where his hand could touch it instantly.

He smiled, thinking that the blade of the Escobars might protect Paso Brand. Then he noticed that Ben Davis had strolled in and scated himself on a box under the dim oil lamp hanging in the center of the long room.

The big bearded miner was calmly smoking a short-stemmed pipe. He looked as if he might sit there a long time tonight. It looked as though Davis was sitting there, silent and watchful, to see that Paso Brand slept safely.

Now and then you ran across men like Davis, honest, square, quick to help a man who was in a tight. Bull Gardner in El Paso had seemed like that. Now Paso wasn't sure of anything about Gardner. He had expected that mine owner to approach him with further questions tonight. Paso tried to figure out why, in the few moments before heavy sleep claimed him.

Sometime during the night the noisy hammer of the stamp mill stopped and the night shift came off work. Paso roused briefly as the night miners began to straggle to their bunks. Then, before he knew it, the sun was bright, machinery was hammering again, and the Concho sounded like any other busy mining camp.

At noon Kitty Gardner still had not started back to Three Forks. And Bull Gardner had made no move to probe further into what had happened last night.

Sandy Cole and Tex were keeping away from Paso. Which might mean anything. By afternoon it was evident that Gardner's daughter must be staying over another day. Paso stopped at the stable for the third time during the day to feast his eyes on the big, cream-colored stallion.

Tony Ramos joined him outside the corral and smiled as he followed Paso's gaze inside.

"Plenty come to look at him," said the hostler. "By golly, they never see such a horse, I tell you! Me, I give one damn year's pay for heem

if I ever have so much pay."

Paso fingered tobacco into a paper and rolled a cigarette. "He ain't for sale. I wonder where Sonora Joe Riley got him."

"Las' night I remember somet'ing I hear once," said Tony Ramos. "Thees horse belonged to a *rico grande*—what you say?—a great man in Mejico. Sonora Joe keel him just for to get thees horse. Now Sonora Joe ees dead, too. Maybe for thees horse so big, so beautiful, death ees the price, eh? Death ees the one price greater than money, my frien'."

Paso chuckld. "Maybe so. But I wasn't after this horse when I shot Riley. Ain't he a beauty, though? He rides like a cloud an' runs like the wind, an' if he ever gets tired, he didn't show it on the way here."

Tony Ramos rolled a cigarette, too. The rugged ugliness of his smile was shaded with doubt.

"Si, a beauty señor. Soch a beauty that the devil must see heem long ago. I don't know—maybe I don't like to own thees horse, after all."

"You ain't going to get the chance," Paso said, and turned as his name was called.

IT was Gardner. With him was Jules Horgan, and walking between them was a ragged Mexican leading a bony old mule that had a sheepskin tied on for a saddle, a bridle mended with old rope, and reins of rope.

"This here man," said Gardner brusquely as he came up, "rode here to leave a note. The men brought him to me. He claims he was stopped by strange men who ordered him to ride here for them. This is for you, Brand."

Paso opened the folded, crumpled

sheet of wrapping paper. A pencil had crudely printed:

Send my Big Star hoss back with this Mex or I'll kill the hombre who's got him. Maybe I will anyway for shootin' at me.

SONORA JOE RILEY.

Paso whistled softly. "So Sonora Joe ain't dead, after all?"

"Evidently not," Gardner said grimly.

"He won't get the horse by sending for him," Paso declared. "I got the horse just like Riley did, and I'll keep him the same way. Was that what you wanted to hear?"

"You're the one to decide," said Gardner. "It's your horse as long as you can back it up."

"I'll try," said Paso, and turned to the Mexican. "Savvy?"

Unshaven, stoop-shouldered, vacant-eyed, the Mexican carried a ragged old straw sombrero in his hand and looked stupid as he shrugged and shook his head.

Paso spoke in Spanish. "Ride back and say that another owns the horse now."

The Mexican ducked his head humbly. "Si, señor," he muttered.

Horgan's smile was hard under his black mustache. "This'll mean more trouble for us to worry about," he said to Gardner. "Sonora Riley won't let it go at this. I've heard he's killed three men in getting that damn horse, the owner and two men who were riding with him. Riley will have the animal back one way or another if he has to start killing again to do it."

"Mister," said Paso mildly, "I don't know as much about Sonora Riley as you seem to, but I'm keeping the horse until he comes after it. Riley and I will talk about that stage holdup first. If that don't suit the Concho mine, I'll ride on."

"That's all I wanted to know,"

said Gardner. "Horgan, take this man to the gate and send him on his way."

With ill grace, Horgan walked off with the ragged Mexican.

Tony Ramos caught Paso's eye and flashed white teeth in a wry smile. "No, I don't think I want that horse, amigo. Hees price ees still death, eh?"

CHAPTER X

DAINGEROUS PLANS

STEP over here, Brand," Gardner said. When they were off to themselves, the mine owner stared for a moment, hands on his hips, and then demanded, "Do you know who Sonora Riley is?"

Paso nodded.

"And you're ready to tangle with him?"

"Why not?"

"Brand, you're a hard case."

"I never figured so."

"You are," Gardner said. "You proved it last night. And I'm satisfied now that I can trust you."

"How am I supposed to feel about that?" Paso asked with a trace of sarcasm.

Gardner's gesture was impatient.

"Considering what I'm up against, Brand, my trusting a man says a lot."

"I suppose so," Paso conceded. "What about Horgan? You trust him plenty, I reckon?"

Gardner's cold gray eyes stared for a moment before he nodded.

"Brand, when the day comes that I can't trust Horgan, I'll know there's not much use trying to keep the mine open. If I can't trust Horgan, I'll never be able to trust any man."

"And that," remarked Paso, "is saying a lot."

"That's the way it is," Gardner

said. "I'm sorry you and Horgan got off on the wrong foot. Horgan's a good hater and bound to run things when he can. Yesterday he thought you were in the wrong and backed it up his way."

Gardner, paused, considering. "Maybe Horgan hasn't changed his mind about you, but he'll take my orders about it. So forget him."

Paso changed the subject without committing himself. "Was that what you wanted to say?"

"At the moment," said Gardner, "it is. I just wanted you to know that I'm trusting you in anything that comes up. I want you to know that you're among a very few whom I'm depending on."

"Thanks," said Paso. "You ain't wrong about it. But you didn't show it by not asking more about what happened down the road last night."

"I've been hiding what I believed last night," Gardner said coolly. "I'm giving out plenty of rope and hoping those two will get reckless or hurried and hang themselves. I want to find out who they talk to and what they do. Did anything more happen last night that I should know about?"

"Maybe not," said Paso. "Shorty Baxter sent word for Cole to do something that Cole didn't have stomach to try. He tried to back out. The Baxter man told him it'd mean gunplay with Baxter if he didn't go through with it."

"What was it?" Gardner asked quickly.

"I'd like to know. Cole said it'd start you shooting fast if you found out. He'd just agreed to do it, when the Baxter man's horse spotted me and hell was all over the road. I'd run them two snakes out of camp, if I was you. They're up to something dirty."

"I've had plenty of it all along," Gardner growled. "I guess I can handle this. Are you up to a hard fast ride?"

"On Riley's horse I am."

"Any horse you like," said the mine owner. "Better go over your guns and draw more ammunition if you need it. I want you ready if I call on you."

GARDNER turned on his heel and walked away. His shoulders were back, head was up, and he was scowling thoughtfully. Paso watched him go and reached for the tobacco sack again. So Gardner trusted Horgan above all others?

Yesterday Sandy Cole had hurried in to see Horgan while Paso was dismounting beside the mine office. Cole had carried word of the stranger's arrival—and Horgan had come to the office door primed for trouble.

Cole had edged forward in the crowd and tripped Paso during the fight. Cole and Horgan were evidently thick. How did that stack up beside Gardner's feeling about Horgan and the fact that Sandy Cole was linked with the Baxter bunch? Then Kitty Gardner had all but stumbled over Horgan listening in the outer office while Gardner was talking to Paso.

The amused voice of Tony Ramos spoke behind Paso.

"I t'ink I study hard too if Sonora Joe Riley send for my horse."

Paso turned with a faint smile. "Who wouldn't be scared green? What do you know about Horgan?"

Tony Ramos spread his hands out open and empty as he shrugged.

"Any reason why Horgan an' this Sandy Cole should be good friends?" Paso questioned.

"No savvy."

"You ain't any good to me," Paso said good-naturedly.

"Sure, I know; I'm jus' a horse hand," said Tony Ramos with a flash of white teeth. "Now I ask you somet'ing about that *pelado* what come here. Hees mule ready to fall down. Hees old clothes almost fall off. Hees whiskers two, t'ree days old. You bet me he don' have ten *centavos* to spend, huh?"

"I reckon not," agreed Paso.

"Who he ees? W'at he do to eat an' live?" Tony Ramos asked with a peculiar smile.

"How do I know who he is? Maybe he's got a little shack and some sheep or goats somewhere or works around."

"He work to live, huh?"

"I reckon so. It don't rain grub in these parts more'n once a year. What are you driving at?"

"Nothing," said Tony Ramos. "But hees hands, *amigo*, so soft and fine like one of the *gente fina*. Hees hands don' do a peon's work. Hees feet don' walk right in those huarachas he wear. Hees feet too small, like one of the *gente fina*. An' hees eyes don' miss nothing, I tell you, that damn *pelado*."

"Why'n hell didn't you say some of that while he was here?"

Tony Ramos shrugged. "I am pay to watch horses," he remarked. "W'at I do to put my face in the beeg boss' business? If he ask me, I say so. Eef he don' ask, Tony Ramos watch the horses."

Paso made a break for the front of the camp. But when he got there the ragged Mexican and his mule were not in sight.

"He kicked that bag of bones into a run down the road," a guard at the gate said. "I've had a smoke since he's been outa sight."

Paso swore under his breath. The cream stallion could catch the old mule if one could be sure where the mule had gone. But Baxter's men

might be waiting just out of sight. They might be hoping such a fool move would be made.

Reluctantly Paso abandoned the idea. But it made a man feel sheepish to know that one of the Baxter bunch had ridden in under their noses and ridden safely out again. And it left Paso wondering whether Riley's horse had been all the Mexican had come for.

The afternoon dragged to the steady roar of the stamp mill. Little ore cars trundled out of the mine and dumped rock clattering into the ore bins. Gray-black smoke drifted in an uneasy plume from the black boiler stack.

Far back in the mountain, one knew, lights were flickering dimly in the damp blackness where sweating men ripped out the high-grade rock. Out here in the sunlight men were busy at the mill. The night shift men were waiting to take their turn at labor.

Nothing about all this should make a man nervous. This was a rich gold camp. It should be solid, safe with the might, the power of yellow gold.

But it wasn't safe and everyone in the camp knew it. Under the bright blaze of the brassy sun fear hung like the everlasting dust around the mill stamps. Fear of what might strike from outside the wire, suspicion of others inside the wire.

AS Paso walked about, he caught men eying him furtively. He noticed stares that lacked friendliness. Ben Davis gave him the answer.

"Word has traveled around," explained Davis, "that we'll have more trouble over the hoss you rode on here. Some of the men are still mixed up about last night. They

ain't sure about you. Hell, they ain't sure about anyone around here. A couple of weeks makes them mighty jumpy. They get so they expect anything and believe anything. I take it there's been no move from them two skunks who double-crossed you last night."

"Not yet," said Paso.

"It'll come," Davis warned. "It'll come and there won't be no warning."

"I'd give a heap for two pairs of eyes," Paso admitted, smiling thinly. "But I'll try to make out. How come Horgan stands so high with Gardner?"

"You ain't the only one who's wondered," said Davis. "I'm one of the oldest men here now. Horgan was here when I come. I've seen things that would indicate Horgan an' Gardner ain't exactly crazy about each other. But mostly they run along together like a bull and a bear caught in a forest fire an' no time for personal fights."

"Funny," mused Paso.

"Damn funny," Davis agreed. "But you get used to expectin' anything around here."

Paso could believe it. He found his own nerves tightening, his attention sharp, a feeling going with him that anything might happen at any time.

Half an hour before the night shift was due to troop back in the tunnel, Gardner's hail brought Paso around near the mill. Gardner came striding hurriedly.

"Saddle up, Brand. As soon as I get out the dynamite for the night shift, I'm starting a fast buggy and guards for Three Forks."

The sun had slid down behind the mountain. The first steel-gray somberness of twilight was moving into the sky.

"Night trip, huh?" said Paso, look-

ing at the sky. "I reckon we're taking the young lady back?"

Gardner frowned and nodded almost reluctantly, as if he hated to talk about the matter.

"She's got to go back fast, Brand. A night ride will be safest. No one has any idea but what she's staying on. I'm taking the gold on hand also, and men whom I think I can trust. No one else knows we're leaving. There won't be a chance for word to get out until we're well on our way. Four horses to a light buggy will travel faster than we can be caught."

Gardner's face darkened. "Then," he finished grimly, "with the gold on hand out of the way and my daughter safe, we'll have a showdown. I'm bringing back every gunman money will hire. I'll have them deputized. I'll rawhide Baxter and his wolves until they're killed or run out of these parts."

"You're on the right track," Paso approved. "I've been wondering why you didn't use some of your gold that way long ago."

"A good reason," said Gardner. "Baxter can call on twenty or thirty outlaws. Maybe more. A showdown fight to clean out the country between here and the Border will bring more gunmen to help Baxter. They can't afford to be run out of this Border strip. They'd never be as safe anywhere else."

"It's a hell of a job at that," Paso agreed. "Maybe I'd have strung wire and set tight like you did."

"It didn't work," confessed Gardner. "They're bleeding me to death. Now I'll jump them while I've got the gold to give me a chance." Gardner slammed a clenched fist into a palm. "We'll get the gold out safely and bring men back. So get ready to ride."

Gardner started to turn away. Then they both stood rooted to the spot as two fast gunshots knifed thinly through the stamp mill racket.

Gardner's hand went instinctively to the gun at his side as he broke into a run toward the spot. Paso followed at his heels.

CHAPTER XI

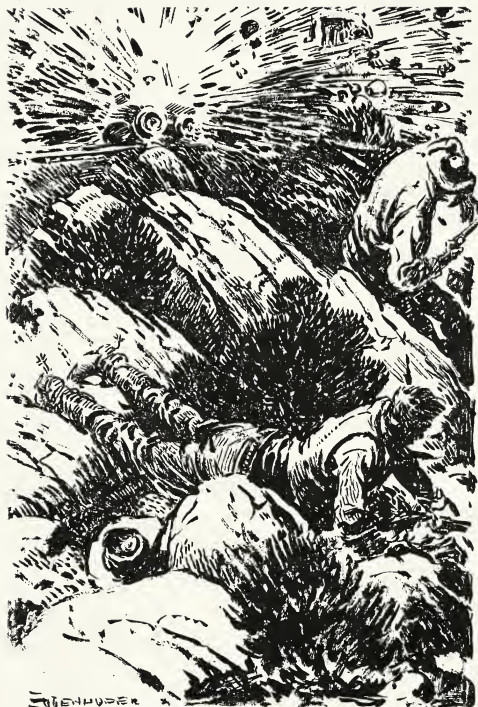
AN EXPLOSION!

THE shots had been fired at the back of the camp, where the wire inclosure reached into the rocky little canyon which spawned the mountain stream. The hammering steel stamps had all but blotted out the gunshots. As he started to run, Paso noticed a man or two staring curiously. But that was all. No one else seemed to know that anything was wrong, and it would take time to spread an alarm.

But Paso knew why Gardner was bolting like a wild man toward the sound of the shots. Back there in the little canyon, around a jutting shoulder of rock from the camp, and the mine workings, was where the powder stores were kept.

In the rock side of the narrow little canyon an old prospector's tunnel had been enlarged into a store-room. A solid steel inner door was fronted by the wooden outer door, each triple-locked, with a man on guard night and day. Two steel rails ran from the powder room to the mine tunnel. Explosives were loaded on one of the little ore cars as needed and rolled to the mine.

Now Gardner was running toward trouble near the stored explosives. A shoulder of rock at the canyon entrance cut off view of the spot. If the stored explosives went off, it would shake the mountain, demolish the camp, kill, maim, stun all men



Suddenly around Paso and Gardner the world seemed to blow up in a gigantic thundering roar!

nearby. Paso drew his gun as he ran.

He was at Gardner's heels as they bolted around the shoulder of rock and saw the steel rails stretching up the canyon. On the left the canyon side was steep, brush-covered. On the right rocks and brush covered a rough, low bank beside the cold swift water of the little stream.

The track had a slight upgrade. One of the ore cars was coasting slowly down the grade toward them. And up at the end of the track where the explosives were stored in the living rock four men were standing.

Paso recognized the stooped, gray-haired bookkeeper and two overalled miners with their hands in the air. Tex had them cowed with a six-gun. He fired a shot down the track as Paso and Gardner dashed into view. Then a jump put Tex behind his three prisoners where he was safe from flying lead.

At that moment Sandy Cole backed out of the powder room, paying out line from a coil that hung over his arm. He saw Paso and Gardner and went hurriedly about what he was doing without drawing his gun.

Tex fired again. Gardner did not stop. An oath burst from Paso as he realized what Sandy Cole was doing.

THAT coil over the red-headed gunman's arm wasn't rope. That coil was fuse that Cole was laying from the explosive room.

Tex yelled something. Sandy Cole dropped the fuse, slammed the massive wooden door, went to his knees, grabbed up the end of the fuse and struck a match. That told its own story. Shorty Baxter had ordered all this. Paso could see the dead guard lying where Tex and Cole and shot him down.

Now Tex was shooting past the prisoners. Here in the canyon it was quieter. Paso heard the loud whang of a bullet smashing through the thin steel side of the slow-rolling little ore car.

The two miners sprawled down on the ground. The bookkeeper started to follow. Tex yanked him up, held him for a shield and aimed carefully again. Another bullet smashed into the ore car.

"Why don't the dirty skunk stand out alone and fight?" Gardner cried with furious helplessness.

Tex snatched a rifle off the ground as Gardner shot twice. The little bookkeeper staggered and fell. Tex whipped the rifle up to his shoulder.

"Get down, Gardner!" Paso yelled. "He ain't shootin' at us! That ore car must have dynamite in it! He's trying to blow it up an' he can't miss with that rifle!"

Paso leaped off the track and went flat, sprawling to the ground amid the rocks and bushes.

Gardner halted. Standing there, he emptied his six-gun so fast the shots made one burst of sound. Only then did Gardner get off the track and go to the ground some yards ahead.

Paso lifted his head. Tex was weaving, obviously hit hard. But he got the rifle against his shoulder and fired.

And the world blew up in a crashing gigantic thundering roar of sound that deafened, crushed, unmercifully beat at the senses. It was as if the hand of a mighty giant had slammed down a destructive force.

The little steel ore car dissolved in a sheet of flame and smoke. The force of the explosion beat Paso hard against the ground, crushed at his ears. For a terrible moment breath

was torn away. Then the clattering rain of debris started.

Rocks, metal, bits of bushes and trees showered down. Ears deafened by the blast could barely make out the rumble of bigger rocks as they rolled down the steep canyon side.

Instinctively Paso shielded his head with his arms. It was no protection if a big rock struck him, but it was all he could do.

Small fragments pelted him. One great boulder crashed over the mine track, missed his head by less than a yard and bounded into the creek. His face was rawhided by the rock fragments it struck off in passing.

A small avalanche poured down near the spot where the ore car had exploded. Paso remembered Gardner and struggled up. The mine owner lay there half-buried by the rocks.

Bright blood was flowing over the side of Gardner's face. He was motionless when Paso reached him. And on up the track where the powder-room door was closed and the lighted fuse was burning, only Sandy Cole was on his feet. And Cole looked unsteady, as if he, too, had been hurt by the explosion. Paso had instinctively held onto his gun. Now he broke into a lurching run toward Cole.

Cole fired at him. The small gunman's face was snarling. His bullet must have passed close, but Paso didn't think about it. His mind was on the awful thought of what would follow when the fuse burned into the powder room.

Cole fired again and again—and Paso held that dogged weaving run toward him, holding shots until he got close.

Cole's gun emptied. He started to reload and then suddenly turned and ran up the canyon. The shots Paso fired missed and the gunman

vanished in the underbrush.

Only Cole knew how long the fuse would take to burn—and he was running. Paso wanted to turn and run the other way. He was still trembling from the ore car blast. Thought of a far mightier explosion made nerves crawl helplessly.

BUT there was still a chance to do something. Paso kept on. He was still many yards away when one of the miners staggered up to the powder-room door, stooped, caught the fuse in both hands and jerked back with all his strength.

The fuse broke. Blood was streaming down into the miner's right eye and he was dashing it away with the back of his hand and feverishly examining the end of the fuse when Paso ran up.

In that instant the fuse spit fire from the end. The miner hurled it down. His clear eye seemed to be bulging in the socket.

"Got it just in time!" he blurted hoarsely. "A few seconds more an' it'd been too late! He locked the damned door!"

Sandy Cole had slammed the massive wooden door and snapped one of the triple locks. The fuse led under the locked door. No power on earth could have stopped an explosion by the time Paso would have reached the spot.

"Mister," Paso said weakly, "you sure carry a rabbit's foot!"

"Ain't it the truth! Something hit me on the head an' knocked me clean out! First thing I thought of when my eyes opened was that fuse! What's the matter with Bill there?"

Bill was the other miner, a big, broad-chested, powerful man, who lay doubled up on the ground, groaning, holding his middle. Bill spoke thickly as Paso bent over him.

"I tried to get up an' he shot me!

Why'd I ever come to this hell spot anyway!"

A shrill, panic-stricken falsetto broke out on Paso's left.

"Oh, Lord, let me get away from here and I'll never be back! It's hell and the devil stays here! The gold's cursed and we're all damned for trying to get it out! Oh, Lord, let me live to get away from here!"

The thin, elderly stoop-shouldered bookkeeper was ashen-faced, shaking, as he stood there crying dazedly.

"The Lord's done his share of helping you just now, buddy!" Paso reminded him. "Don't ask for more favors before you earn 'em! Get back to camp and crawl under your desk an' keep quiet!"

He had to shake the bookkeeper's shoulder before the man drew a shuddering breath, looked helplessly at him, and then broke into a stumbling run down the track.

"You look after this man while I see to Gardner," Paso told the miner. "He's hurt bad."

"How about the dirty killer?"

"He won't be back," guessed Paso. "The men'll tear him to pieces if they catch him. Here they come now!"

MEN had burst into view from the camp. Ben Davis was one of them. He reached Bull Gardner a few seconds before Paso got to the spot.

"What'n hell happened?" Davis demanded.

Paso told them as he helped move Gardner's inert body.

"We shoulda hanged them last night and had it over with!" Davis said angrily. "Looks like this blood on Gardner's face is where a rock struck his head. Is he breathing?"

Paso felt inside Gardner's shirt and nodded.

"His heart's still going. I don't know whether he's shot or not. Better get him to the office. Can't do anything here. Another one up the track there is shot. I think Gardner killed that bowlegged Tex. I hope so. The dirty snake lived long enough to set off a car loaded with dynamite!"

There was no lack of help. Brawny miners locked hands under Gardner's body, lifted him as gently as they could, and started down the track.

Jules Horgan came running to meet them. Paso stopped and outlined what had happened.

Now Horgan was not smiling under his black mustache. For the first time his dislike of Paso Brand was not evident.

Paso's cold probing stare could find no sign that Horgan might have known something about this. No sign that any guilt was attached to the man. But Horgan was clever. He would be able to hide his feelings.

"There's no use sending anyone after Cole," Horgan decided curtly. "We haven't much chance of catching him now. I'll put men guarding the powder in case anyone else has a try at it. Are you hurt, Brand?"

"Shook up is all."

"Tell 'em to put Gardner in bed. I want the medicine chest and hot water, plenty of it. Sims, the bookkeeper, will take care of that. I'll need a few minutes to get things straightened out here and more guards posted." Horgan's stare was probing. "Gardner seems to think you can be trusted, Brand. I'm counting on you to be where I can use you."

This was a new Horgan. Maybe, Paso thought as he hurried toward the office, Gardner had more reason to speak well of Horgan than a man

would believe. And yet, Sandy Cole had been thick with Horgan, had tripped Paso in that fight with Horgan.

How could you be sure of Horgan after that? How could you have much idea what was on Horgan's mind now that Bull Gardner was down and helpless? Horgan might have been waiting for this to happen.

Here at the Concho mine you could believe anything of any man. The bookkeeper was right. The place seemed to be cursed, the devil to have a hand in the rich high-grade yellow gold which was being won by blood and death.

Kitty Gardner, Paso saw, was out in the open before the stone office. She looked slimmer, younger than ever as she ran to meet the men carrying her father. She did not try to hide an agony of fear and apprehension when she saw who they were carrying. Her voice shook. "Is he dead?"

"Not yet," said Paso, and could have bitten his tongue at the scant hope he gave her.

Tears were in her gray eyes. Her hands clenched, her face was pale as she said, "Bring him to the side door. It's closer to his room."

She ran ahead to the door. Paso kept with her, speaking of hot water and the medicine chest.

"I'll see to it," she said. "Sims ran to the bunkhouse. I don't think he'll be much help." Now she was cooler than Paso would have thought possible. No tears, no wringing of hands, no wailing and crying.

SHE led the way to Gardner's bedroom, and then hurried off for hot water and the medicine kit. Her heart must have been breaking, for Bull Gardner was a gruesome sight.

Blood smeared the mine owner's face and clotted in his hair. A gash in his arm had soaked blood into a bandanna which had been hurriedly tied about the spot. In the small, quiet, low-ceilinged bedroom where the miner's heavy boots shuffled uneasily, Gardner looked like a dead man, or a man close to death.

"Get the medicine chest, wherever it is," Paso directed as he opened Gardner's shirt to look for a bullet hole.

The man had not been shot, but the ribs on one side of his chest looked sunken and queer. Paso probed the spot gently with his fingertips, and felt broken bone where a rock had crashed into Gardner's ribs.

Jules Horgan came into the room with his quick catlike tread.

"Get back from the bed; get outside the room, men!" Horgan ordered. "You, Brand, stay in here! Davis, too, I guess! I may need you. Where's the medicine chest and hot water? How is his heart?"

Horgan went into action as he talked. He must have learned some medicine. His hands had a sure, deft touch that Paso had to admire.

"Heart seems all right," Horgan decided. He shook his head as he felt the broken ribs. "Get his boots off," he said to Paso. "Watch that right leg. Something is wrong there."

Paso had not noticed; he saw it now as Horgan examined the leg below the knee.

"Broken," Horgan said and turned back to the great gash at the scalp line which was smearing Gardner's face with blood.

Two men brought in a small stout wooden chest. Another passed in a kettle of hot water and a basin. Kitty Gardner hurried in with towels and a sheet. "How is he?" she asked anxiously.

"Good," said Horgan, rummaging in the chest. "Maybe you'd better wait outside the door, Miss Kitty."

"I'll stay," the girl said. Now her eyes were dry, her pale face calm.

Horgan worked on the head wound first, and Gardner stirred, groaned, opened his eyes. For a moment Gardner looked around vacantly. His hand fluttered uncertainly to his face.

"Father!" Kitty Gardner said, and now there was a sob in her voice.

A faint, grim smile lighted Gardner's blood-smeared countenance.

"I'm all right, baby," he mumbled. He looked at Horgan, Ben Davis, Paso. "Did it all go up?"

"No," said Horgan. "You got Tex. Cole escaped."

Gardner closed his eyes. "Baxter's work. There'll be more coming. Get the gold out and Kitty along with it. Can't have her here if trouble busts loose. Brand can take her. Need you here, Horgan."

"Brand?" said Horgan. Some of the old distrust was in the question.

"Brand," Gardner muttered. "Want all the gunmen hired he can get. Pat Thompson at Three Forks'll give him help. Get Kitty away."

"I'll not leave you like this, father," Kitty Gardner said unsteadily.

"Got to get you away," Gardner mumbled. He was gray-faced, weaker with each word. He tried a deep breath and a spasm of pain crossed his face.

"She'll start as soon as you're fixed up," Horgan promised. He looked over his shoulder at Paso.

"The men are saddling at the corral, Brand. The gold's ready to load in the buggy. You're in charge. Miss Gardner will be ready."

"No!" Kitty Gardner refused.

Paso was leaving the room as Hor-

gan answered coolly. "I'm running the Concho now, Miss Gardner. You'll do as your father says."

CHAPTER XII

BUSHWHACK LEAD

TWILIGHT was deepening fast when Paso reached the corral. Men were roping and saddling horses. Seven, nine men Paso counted. Men he didn't know. Strangers.

Tony Ramos stepped up. "Your horse, too, señor?"

"Si," said Paso. "I'm bossing this, Gardner and Horgan said. Can you ride and shoot?"

Tony Ramos shrugged. "I'm just wan horse hand."

"I know what you are," said Paso. "I'm asking you what you can do. Horse-herding ain't all you know."

"I theenk maybe so," Tony Ramos said quietly.

"Saddle up an' come along," Paso told him. "I like your looks. We're riding to Three Forks with bar gold an' Gardner's girl. I want plenty of guns, an' someone I know along."

A smile flickered behind the rugged ugliness of Ramos' young face.

"So? Maybe you like my Mexican guts, señor?"

"I'll tell you later," said Paso. "Get a good horse an' guns. Somebody else can watch the corral tonight."

The big cream stallion stood in the dusty corral, proudly reserved while other horses milled around. His head was alertly up. He seemed to know work was ahead.

Yes, a man like Sonora Joe Riley would kill for a horse like this. And would kill to get him back, Paso thought, as he led the stallion out of the corral for saddling.

In ten minutes they were ready,

including Tony Ramos, whose saddle, gun boot, rifle and twin six-guns he had not worn until now, showed hard use and care.

Four small, speedy-looking horses were hitched to a two-seated buggy. A man on the back seat had a shotgun and a rifle. The driver had a rifle. He was a wizened oldster with a drooping brown mustache, an old hat canted over one eye and no expression on his face when Paso reined in beside the buggy and asked, "Think you can take it fast all the way in the dark?"

The driver chewed in silence for a moment. He spat over the wheel and drawled, "I reckon so, if Jake hangs on tight back there. Jes' keep out o' my way an' give me room."

"You've got it from now to Three Forks," Paso chuckled. "Drive over to the office an' load up."

It was as simple as that. The men accepted his authority silently. But whether they liked the gaunt young newcomer over them or not was hard to tell.

Ben Davis was giving directions at the office. Men staggered out with two small iron-bound chests. Only gold could have made those chests so heavy. They were put by the feet of the man in the back of the buggy and roped there.

Paso had dismounted. Ben Davis joined him. "Wisht I was going alone," he said.

"Come along. I'll need you."

"Horgan wants me here. Gardner's gal will be out in a few minutes."

"So she decided to go?"

"Hardest thing she's ever faced I reckon," said Davis. "She's got a feeling that Gardner won't leave the Concho alive. But he wants her to go an' she's not going to worry him by being contrary."

"Good girl," Paso said, and looked

at the darkening sky. "I'd rather do a heap of things than start to Three Forks with that girl."

"An' that gold," added Ben Davis slowly. "Brand, there's men here in camp who'd kill their own mother for a chance at that much gold. Not to speak of outlaws outside."

"How about these men I'm taking?" Paso asked under his breath.

"I wisht I knew," Davis admitted. "Better watch sharp. If you ask me, hell has finally busted loose around here. What's due to follow ain't gonna be nice."

KITTY GARDNER walked to the buggy through the deep purple twilight. She was solemn and quiet. Paso could not help contrasting her with the girl who had left Three Forks only the day before.

Sims, the bookkeeper, pushed through the crowd of miners which had gathered for the departure.

"I'm going!" Sims cried shrilly. "Not another night in this cursed place!"

One of the guards rode forward and blocked him from the buggy.

"You've got to take me!" Sims begged frantically.

"Can't we take him, Mr. Brand?" Kitty Gardner asked.

"Ride the back seat, Sims," Paso decided. "First trouble you make, I'll have you pitched out on the road."

The buggy rolled off a moment later. The heavy gate opened for them; the armed riders poured through; then the buggy followed to the road, and the long whiplash sent the four-horse team running hard eastward into the somber cloak of night.

Paso glanced back at the mine as he topped the crest of the first grade. Lights were beginning to wink back

there. The faint beat of the stamp mill reached through the drumming hoofs like the restless strokes of a heart that would not stop—like Bull Gardner's heart that stubbornly defied all odds.

Four men rode behind the buggy, four in front, including Paso. The effortless run of Sonora Riley's horse would make any man glow with pride.

"*Caramba, w'at a horse, amigo!*" Tony Ramos called over through the last purple light. "But that buggy, she's coming plenty fas', no?"

The droop-mustached old driver was driving the fast four-horse team with reckless skill. The racing buggy bounced, lurched, swayed along the rough and winding road and careened around the sharp turns.

Night blotted out the road, and the bouncing, swaying buggy came on faster than ever. Kitty Gardner would never forget this ride.

Mile after mile the road down through the bleak and lonely hills. The stars were cold and bright and the black shadows wrapped the way with protection. Each mile put them nearer Three Forks and safety for Gardner's gold and Gardner's daughter. Riding ahead with Ramos and two more men, Paso felt his spirits begin to lift with relief.

THE devil himself could not have struck with less warning. It might have been the devil himself waiting on that stretch of road where low stunted trees grew close and the road shadows between them were blacker.

Tony Ramos and another rider were just ahead of Paso, and barely visible in the starlight. The first warning was a wild yell from Ramos. Both of the men and the horses they were riding plunged helplessly down on the road.

Paso's horse snorted, tried to leap the tangle of fallen horses and men and went down in a plunging fall himself. Paso kicked his feet out of the box stirrups as he was hurled from the silver-mounted saddle.

A kicking hoof knocked him rolling to the side of the road. A horse screamed in fright, and the bawling curses of the old buggy driver were audible as the hard-running harness horses bolted into the tangle that blocked the road. More horses went down. The buggy overturned as guns blazed from the side of the road.

"Shoot them men riding behind!" a voice bawled.

Paso came up by the side of the road with his left arm numb and useless where the floundering horse kicked him. His rifle had gone down in the saddle boot and the horse wasn't visible.

Snatching out his hand gun, Paso turned past the floundering horses toward the overturned buggy. Something in the blackness tripped him. He came up from the second fall, knowing that a rope had been stretched taut between the roadside trees at the right height to bring down running horses.

Ambushed gunmen beside the road were pouring shots. The muzzle flashes were like vicious fireflies. Back on the road other guns were answering, but the flashes were retreating. Paso swore helplessly. All Gardner's gold could not make his hired gunmen stand in the murderous crossfire of a surprise ambush.

A shotgun bellowed just ahead. In the trees a man yelled with pain. "Come on, yuh dirty killers an' get more of it!" the buggy driver challenged in shrill fury.

Paso blundered into the front wheels of the overturned buggy. "Miss Gardner!" he called.

The driver answered from the other side of the buggy. "She got out safe! Where are yuh, lady?"

A riderless horse almost knocked Paso down as it bolted back along the road. The thin, crying fright of Sims, the bookkeeper, pierced through the gunshots. Snorting floundering harness horses were pulling in all directions and dragging the buggy along the road.

"Miss Gardner!" Paso shouted again.

"Here!" her voice answered. She was up at the head of the plunging team. "One of these horses is down! I think his leg is broken!"

"Keep away from them!" Paso yelled, sick at heart as he ran forward. Bull Gardner himself could not have avoided this trap. But Gardner wouldn't believe that.

The numbed shoulder became usable again as Paso dodged around the maddened horses and bumped into a slender figure. His quick catch saved her from falling.

"This way!" Paso said huskily.

Flashing guns along the roadside showed that they were vastly outnumbered. But bullets weren't striking around the overturned buggy. Paso guessed Kitty Gardner was the reason. The bandits were trying not to hit her.

"Put down them guns an' you won't be hurt!" a strident voice yelled from the tree.

Paso looked desperately about as he reached Kitty Gardner and ran her forward in the road. He saw a lighter shadow and made for it, thanking God when he saw he was right. The big cream-colored horse stood uneasily with the reins dragging, so well trained he had not bolted after regaining his feet.

Speaking soothingly, Paso caught the reins, led the horse a step to make sure it was not crippled.

"Hold onto the stirrup!" Paso told the girl.

He forked the saddle, reached down and swung Kitty Gardner up before him, and yanked the big stallion to the left off the road as other riders poured out of the trees ahead of them and blocked the road.

A wild yell announced their discovery.

"There's one of them on a white hoss! My Star Blaze hoss, by damn!"

Paso ducked trying to shield the girl, as the big horse burst in among the trees. Behind them the pursuit came thundering, and the bellow of Sonora Joe Riley warned, "Don't shoot my hoss! I want him sound!"

Three branches slashed Paso's face. A low-hanging limb scraped the top of his head and almost knocked him from the saddle.

BEHIND them guns were crashing, but they were aiming high in the dark, trying not to hit the horse. Paso's rifle was still in the hand-tooled saddle boot, but the rolling horses had broken the gun stock.

No use firing a six-gun back at them. Muzzle flashes would only give the outlaws better aim. Suddenly Paso stifled an oath as the stallion swerved sharply to dodge a tree and the saddle slipped.

Helplessly Paso realized that the rolling fall on the road had loosened the saddle. Any second now it might turn and throw them under the driving hoofs. And the pursuit was following so close there wasn't a chance to dismount and tighten the cinches.

The horse swerved hard again. The saddle slipped badly this time. Paso reined hard to a stop.

"Saddle's coming off!" he ripped out. "Let's try to give 'em the slip in the dark!"

Kitty Gardner dropped lightly to the ground. Paso hurled himself after her; and so quickly did they dismount and run that for an instant Paso had hopes they might be swallowed in the night's blackness.

But the pursuit roared up with heartbreaking speed. Men yelled when the empty saddle was discovered.

"There he goes!" one called.

A gun crashed; riders ripped among the trees after them, and Paso knew this was the end.

"There's a lady here!" he shouted. "Hold your guns!"

Panting and bitterly helpless, Paso spoke bleakly to Kitty Gardner. "It's the best I could do. I'm sorry."

"We tried anyway," the girl said unsteadily.

Then riders were all about them. Men swung down with drawn guns and they were prisoners.

"Hell, it's the gal! He musta got away with her!"

"Who is he?"

"He was ridin' Sonora's hoss," a rasping voice said. "Maybe he's the feller Sonora wants! Hey, Sonora! Take a look at this man!"

A match was struck. Other matches flared out. Faces leaped into view—unshaven, hard faces, some leering, some scowling.

"Ain't she a purty little trick?"

"Shorty'll do a buck and wing over this! He swore he'd ruther have her than all the gold that come out o' the damn mine."

"Shorty ain't so dumb. I kind o' feel that way myself after gittin' a good look at her. Ain't seen nothin' so sweet an' purty in a year!"

Kitty Gardner groped for Paso's hand. She was trembling as she clutched his fingers for comfort.

"Keep steady," Paso comforted her. But in his heart he could find no comfort for this girl, small hope

that she would escape. There was a venom and hate between the outlaw, Shorty Baxter, and Bull Gardner, which was hard to understand or explain.

A man shouldered to them, struck several matches together, and held the flame close to their faces.

Tall, lean and saturnine, with two six-guns tied low, a knife sheathed on his hip, wearing a gaudy Mexican jacket with silver concha buttons, there was nothing reassuring about the man who peered at them.

A high-peaked Mexican sombrero hung back on his shoulders, held by braided leather thongs, a bandage was tied around his forehead, and a thin cold smile twisted his mouth as he surveyed Paso.

"It's the one," he said. "By hell, he's the one who shot a rock splinter in my face yesterday an' stole my hoss! This is shore a lucky night!"

"How about the gal, Sonora?"

Sonora Riley dropped the match ends as his grin broadened.

"She's Shorty's. Tie this hoss thief an' walk him back. The gal rode right purty on my saddle gettin' here; I'll cuddle her back on the same saddle myself."

Talk would be futile. Paso kept his teeth locked tight while his arms were roped to his sides and a rider took the end of the rope and drove him on foot back toward the road.

And Kitty Gardner, too, was silent as Sonora Joe Riley swung her up on the big horse and rode ahead.

CHAPTER XIII

SHORTY BAXTER'S REVENGE

HOPE had left Paso Brand. The four guards riding behind the buggy had bolted back toward the Concho mine. And Paso had heard nor seen nothing of

Tony Ramos after the first warning yell as Ramos fell.

Now all shooting back in the road had stopped. They were vastly outnumbered. The Concho and any help that might be sent were long miles back into the west.

A fire of dry branches crackled and blazed in the road by the overturned buggy when Paso walked out of the trees. Two dead horses lay in the road. Near one horse lay the dead guard who had ridden beside Tony Ramos. The other guard was there, a sullen prisoner.

The gray-haired driver of the buggy was holding a wounded arm. Sims was cowering in terrified silence. The man who had been guarding the gold in the back seat was not in sight. The outlaws had dragged the two iron-bounded gold chests to the fire.

As Paso approached, a short, fleshless man with a clean-shaven face held a six-gun close to the lock of one of the chests and shattered it with shots. He worked a moment, then threw the lid back.

Whistles and exclamations greeted the gleam of small yellow gold bars in the firelight.

"We c'n buy out South America an' live off the white fat down there from now to then!" a man whooped.

The outlaw who had opened the chest faced them with the smoking gun slack in his hand. For a moment a racking terrible cough shook his emaciated body. Then his voice cracked at them like a lash.

"Forget this gold until there's time enough to spend it! We got plenty more to do!"

"Nothin' that'll get us anything like this, Shorty!"

Paso stared in fascination at Shorty Baxter, whom he was finally facing. The bandit leader seemed

to shrink and crouch and coil as he faced the speaker.

"Yuh don't like the way I'm running things, Johnson?"

The man he called Johnson would have made two of Baxter. He wore twin guns also. But his denial was hasty and fervent.

"Everything suits me, Shorty. I was just puttin' in my word."

"I don't need yore talk to run this bunch!"

Shorty Baxter turned to Paso. Blazing branches fell in on the fire and the flames leaped up. The light flickered and danced over a face that was like dry leather stretched taut over a bony skull in which sunken eyes blazed malevolently.

The stage driver had said that nine years in the Yuma pen had sweated Shorty Baxter down to a sack of bones. It had. Baxter was like a death's head on a body that had wasted away to bone, a few sinews, and skin.

Looking like a living skeleton, Shorty Baxter stood there with a flame burning inside him, a fire glowing back of his eyes that was like nothing human. He was vicious, venomous, malevolent. He looked as if the fire of life inside him fed on hate and cold inhuman fury that included all men.

AT Paso's left Sonora Riley held the arm of Kitty Gardner. In the firelight Riley's face was bold, reckless and cruel, but it lacked the bitter hate that seemed to ooze from Shorty Baxter.

Paso wondered again why a hard-bitten border-jumper in his own right, like Sonora Joe Riley, should be taking orders from any outlaw leader. Even Shorty Baxter.

Baxter's eyes were burning at Paso. "So you're the one who's under my feet every move I make!"

"What moves," asked Paso, "are you making?"

Shorty Baxter had that coiling look again, as if he were posing to strike without warning.

"The stage yesterday!" he said. "An' that little play at the mine just before dark! Yuh was in both of them up to yore damn neck!"

Sandy Cole must have gotten away clean and made contact with the outlaws. Paso looked around, but among the dozen and a half men crowding close to the fire, he failed to see Cole.

It was plain however that this outlaw bunch had been close to the Concho before dark. They had been waiting, Paso guessed with a flash of insight, for the great store of explosives to wreck and stun the mine camp before they poured down like buzzards to pick the bones that were left. Baxter had planned it all when he sent orders to Sandy Cole last night.

"Your business is your own," Paso said shortly. "I've been tackling things as they come up."

Baxter's death's head smile was ghastly.

"Yuh tackled one too many, mister. We had a spyglass on the mine while yuh was fixin' to leave. Yuh didn't have a chance."

"Wisht I'd known," said Paso. "Maybe we'd have had a chance."

Baxter looked around at the prisoners. "These men say Gardner's flat on his back an' helpless. Maybe dead by now."

"He'll take a heap of killing," declared Paso, and added against his better judgment. "Maybe you've found that out."

Baxter jumped at him, striking with the gun barrel. The fury flaring on that fleshless face was murderous. Paso dodged and the blow

struck his shoulder instead of his head.

"Don't laugh at me," Shorty Baxter was screaming, "or I'll give yuh some of what I've been savin' for Gardner for ten years!"

You could almost see froth on the screaming lips, then icy reason blotted out the insane fury. Baxter shuddered and stepped back, shaken by a spasm of coughing. His voice came forced and husky.

"Gardner'll never die until I settle with him! He'll live to suffer an' think an' eat his heart out! He'll die a thousand times every time I send word to him about what's happening to his daughter down below the Border! With his mine gone an' his daughter gone, he'll think of Shorty Baxter day an' night until he's dead!"

Silence had fallen over the ring of outlaw gunmen. It was as if something gruesome and terrible beyond their own hard-bitten sins had silenced them.

Paso slid a look at Kitty Gardner, so pale, young and helpless now. The firelight danced against tears she was holding back as she bit hard on her lower lip.

"What have you got against Gardner?" Paso asked Baxter carefully.

Baxter had his harsh dry voice under control now. "He framed me into the Yuma pen because his sister acted like a fool when I throwed her over," he said. "Walked out in a blizzard an' froze herself to death. Gardner an' that damned Horgan, who was in love with the gal himself, twisted the evidence and had me put in hell for nine long years to pay for it. Told me privately they was aimin' to make me pay one way or another!"

Baxter spat: "I warned them that I'd settle ten for one! God, the years I spent waitin' to get out at them!

And now I've got Gardner like I want him! He'll wish he'd died like that fool sister of his when he hears what's going to happen to his daughter!" He lapsed into silence, grim satisfaction on his long face. Then he said, "Brand, here's a man yuh know. An old *compadre*, he says. Where is that feller?"

"*Compadre*," said Paso, glancing at the man who stepped forward, "how'd you get friendly so quick with these wolves?"

THE "*compadre*," was worn and dusty from hard travel. But he was still slender, aristocratic, dandified; he was still Juan Diego de Escobar, whose family were lords of that wild empire west of Chihuahua City and the frowning peaks of the Continental Divide.

"Gringo," Juan Escobar said stiffly, "I followed."

"I figured you would," nodded Paso. "But I did plan on havin' both hands free when we met up." Paso's lip curled. "You can go back an' tell old Sixto an' Guadalupe an' the other Escobars what a *caballero* they sent out to drag down a lady as good as your own sister."

Juan Escobar was staring at Kitty Gardner. "With her I have nothing to do," he mumbled in Spanish.

Shorty Baxter grinned.

"Some of the boys caught him trailin' that Three Forks stage. They knowed him from Mexico an' brought him to me. When I heered what he was after on this side of the Border, I made a deal promisin' yuh to him after we cleaned out the mine. He talked so damned blood-thirsty that we're all primed to watch his showdown with yuh."

Then Baxter wheeled on the men as if regretting so much talk.

"Get that buggy ready now. The

gold'll stay like it is until we're ready to divvy up an' scatter. Jump fast, boys, while things is runnin' our way!"

CHAPTER XIV

ESCOBAR HONOR AVENGED

THE prisoners were put on horses and their feet roped under their horses' bellies. Kitty Gardner rode once more in the buggy with the gold. The outlaws backtracked a mile or more, then turned southwest across the harsh open country.

The gold bars weighing so heavily in the buggy acted like fiery trade whiskey on the outlaws. They were jubilant, frolicsome, joking and laughing. Paso gathered that they had raided other gold shipments from the mine, but never had such a one as this fallen into their hands. Even Shorty Baxter seemed to share in the jubilation. But it was not gold that affected Baxter. Hate was running like drunken fire through the veins of that emaciated, malevolent gunman.

No wonder Gardner had known no peace, had been fearful for his daughter's safety, and savagely stubborn in keeping his mine open. The blood trail that young Juan Escobar had taken after Paso Brand was the childish exasperation of a harmless young man compared to the venomous purpose of Shorty Baxter.

Not that young Escobar was less dangerous now. Moodily Paso reflected that he was about washed up. The Escobars would have blood for their blood, and pass the story of Escobar justice down to their children's children.

But it was Kitty Gardner and Bull Gardner of whom Paso thought with bitter regret. He'd failed Gardner when the man needed him most.

Small return to give for the saving of your life.

No imagination was needed about Kitty Gardner. Far down in Mexico she wouldn't have a chance. Paso had seen tawdry, hard-faced girls in the *cantinas* and dance halls south of the Border who once might have been Kitty Gardners. They never came back home.

Paso judged it was well past midnight when they traversed a narrow little valley between frowning mountain slopes. The valley narrowed to a long bottle neck, and then widened again. Under the star-studded sky in the south, Paso could make out vast reaches of descending lower country.

They splashed through a tiny mountain brook, and just beyond found corrals filled with horses, and low, badly-weathered adobe buildings.

Waiting men greeted them. Questions were called and answered as riders dismounted. This, Paso gathered, was one of the outlaw hide-outs. His horse had stopped beside the one ridden by the grizzled old buggy driver.

"I had a hunch we was headin' tuh here," the old man grumbled. "Hit's the old Diamond O spread that usta be owned by a feller named McCarty. Rustlers from acrost the border cleaned him out an' he left. Ain't more'n six-seven miles to the Border. Dad-blame this arm! Hit's still oozin' blood. I blowed the head offn the feller who done it, though. Things looks bad fer us, don't they?"

"Kind o'," Paso agreed.

"Gardner's durn gold packs a curse if I ever seen one," the driver said bitterly.

"It seems to," Paso agreed.

Guns covered them as they were taken off the horses. Lanterns were being lit, men were heading to the

corrals for fresh horses as Paso and the other prisoners were hustled inside the old ranchhouse. Half an eye could see that the place had long been abandoned. Only crude repairs had been made.

"Ain't this luck now?"

PASO looked around into the cold-lipped grin of Sandy Cole, who was using a stick for a cane and limping badly when he moved.

"The company don't improve," Paso remarked. "I'm surprised you didn't crawl down in a snake hole so's to feel at home."

Cole's grin was half a snarl as he struck Paso in the face.

Juan Escobar had brought Kitty Gardner in, and he jumped forward as Paso's head snapped back from the blow.

"Thees man is mine!" the young Mexican protested.

"Who'n hell are *you*?" Cole demanded.

Shorty Baxter intervened. "Git away, Cole. I promised Brand to that young feller."

"I've got a score with Brand!" Cole blurted angrily.

"You heered me!" snapped Baxter. "I know what I'm doing. Yuh want to argue about it?"

Sandy Cole shrugged and turned away, glowering.

Juan Escobar spoke coldly to Paso. "That is not the Escobar way."

Paso tasted blood on his lip as he smiled thinly and replied in Spanish. "The Escobars like a knife or gun better, *verdad*?"

"We show no mercy to our enemies, señor."

There was so much stiff-necked, youthful pride in the answer that Paso laughed. Juan Escobar was a handsome young don, following his

code as to what was right. Another time, another place, he might be likable.

In the next room coffee and food were being hurriedly prepared. As fresh horses were saddled and made ready to ride, more men crowded into the room.

Black coffee, plates of beans, bacon and cold Mexican *tortillas* were hurriedly put away. The prisoners were offered nothing, but Paso saw Juan Escobar bring coffee and a plate of food to Kitty Gardner, and urge her in broken English to eat. Finally she drank a little coffee and ate a few bites of food. Chalk that good deed up for the Escobar gallantry at any rate.

Shorty Baxter, Sonora Joe Riley and half a dozen other men were arguing in low voices at the end of the room. Finally Riley left them and began to eat.

When most of the plates were empty and cigarettes were lighted, Shorty Baxter lifted his voice.

"Here's what we're doin'. The gold's going over the Border tonight, where it'll be safe. The girl goes, too. An' that feller Brand goes with the young Mex I promised him to. There's a hide-out a coupla days south where they'll wait for us. We'll know the gold is safe there when we want it."

An uncertain silence was broken by a sullen question.

"Is that Mex gonna take our gold across the border?"

Shorty Baxter's fleshless face was almost ghastly as he grinned.

"Yo're the right feller to ask, Pres. Yore two brothers, Joe and Lon, are gonna take a coupla more men to make sure the gold don't sprout wings when it gets out o' our sight. Pres, yo're gonna come along with us so we'll all be damned sure your brothers don't get tired of wait-

in' an' move on with our gold. If it ain't there when we come lookin' for it, there'll be a Purdy brother filled full of lead fast an' quick, Pres. An' it'll be you. That suit everybody?"

Paso judged most of the men were against it. One bearded, broad-shouldered man spoke for the others.

"What do we get by wipin' the mine out, Shorty? It'll have more gold if it keeps on running. I'm for spending this gold now."

Baxter had the crouching, coiling look again as his voice lashed with contempt.

"The gold's got yuh fools blinded! This whole end of the country will be up in arms over the girl! Ain't a one of yuh'll dare stay around. An' she goes with me! I'll kill the first man who don't like it!"

"Nobody arguin' about that, Shorty."

"Use your heads then! With Gardner's mine blowed up an' Gardner's pockets empty, nobody's gonna give a damn what Gardner thinks. His hands'll be tied. The quickest way to have all this blow over, is to clip Gardner's wings while we got the chance. They won't be lookin' for us at the mine today. Not in broad daylight. They'll figure we skipped over the Border."

"What's Sonora Joe think about it?" a doubtful voice asked.

Sonora Joe Riley took a cigarette from his mouth and nodded.

"I'm stringin' along with Shorty. The sooner we start, the better."

Riley's decision carried the doubtful ones. Hurried preparations started for departure.

IN the confusion, Kitty Gardner had a chance to move close. "Can't we do anything?" she whispered through stiff lips.

"Both bound and helpless," Paso

shrugged. "None of them ever care enough about us to cross Baxter, ma'am."

"The young man who brought me food was kind."

"Young Escobar," Paso said quietly, "followed me out of Mexico to put a knife or a bullet in me."

"But . . . but he was so kind to me—"

Paso's eyes narrowed at a sudden thought.

"Be nice back at him, ma'am. He's the only chance you've got. When you get down in his own country, he might weaken an' help you if he's handled right."

Flushing, Kitty Gardner nodded. A few minutes later Paso noted with satisfaction that she was again talking to Juan Escobar.

And it seemed to Paso that young Escobar's eyes were hungry, troubled as they rested on the girl. Even that slight hope for her cheered Paso.

The gold was stowed in leather pack sacks lashed on two pack mules. There were seven who were making the long ride into Mexico. The two Purdy brothers, Joe and Lon, were big men, bearded and gruff. And there was an outlaw named Jake, and another called Tonopah, a lank, leathery saturnine, slow-moving man. But a dangerous hombre, Paso guessed.

Juan Escobar, Kitty Gardner, Paso and two more pack mules made up the party. Behind them they left the other prisoners, and the main body of the outlaws who were getting ready to ride to the Concho.

Paso's final salute was from Sonora Joe Riley. "If the Mex don't kill you, Brand, I shore will when we meet up."

Paso chuckled grimly.

"If he don't, Riley, I'd like a chance to get that horse back."

Riley laughed ironically as he turned away. "I like yore nerve, Brand. But you said the surest thing to make me kill yuh on sight."

Once more the night swallowed them. The trail they rode wound down through descending broken country into the wilderness south of the Border. South into old Mexico, toward those vast lands where the Escobars were lords, and young Juan, a don in his own right, would one day fill the shoes of old Sixto Escobar.

Paso didn't exactly see how it happened, but after a time he noticed Juan Escobar riding often beside Kitty Gardner. Their low-toned talk was not audible. Paso grinned coldly to himself. Kitty Gardner was working fast. Even an Escobar don had his weak spots.

Two hours of that and dawn was near. They'd ride through the day, Paso was curtly told by Lon Purdy, the big outlaw who rode beside him. "The lady ain't strong enough," Paso objected.

"Who gives a damn? We'll tie her on."

Juan Escobar presently reined back beside Paso, and Lon Purdy growled, "'Bout time yuh got away from that girl. She's Baxter's."

"Thees hombre Brand ees all I want," Escobar said stiffly.

"Gonna cut his throat like yuh swore yuh would?"

"I theenk now ees good time."

Lon Purdy chuckled. "Can't wait, huh? Well, go ahead. He's yores."

"I theenk I do it here and catch up later."

"Hell, yo're cold-blooded," said Purdy. "I don't want to see it. Bring his horse when yo're through."

"Purdy," Paso said coldly, "I wouldn't let a dog get butchered like this."

"If yuh was gold," Purdy retorted, "it might matter. Yuh ain't none of my business anyway. Argue with the Mex there."

Purdy spurred ahead as Juan Escobar yanked Paso's horse to a stop. It was still dark. Paso reached carefully inside his shirt, under his belt. His wrists, tied with rawhide, allowed him to awkwardly handle the knife he brought out. It was the knife of the dead Jose Escobar, which the outlaws hadn't found.

"I got something to say to you," Paso said, heeling his horse so that it danced aside in the trail. Turning the knife, Paso sawed the blade awkwardly up inside his wrists against the rawhide thongs.

"What you say?"

One thong parted—another—and a third. Paso's hands were free and only his ankles were tied under the horse. He gripped the knife, gathered the reins in the other hand, and tensed to spur closer and strike hard. Escobar steel slashing for an Escobar life. Fate, Paso thought, took some queer turns.

CHAPTER XV

ESCAPE

THEN he held back in amazement as words tumbled out of Juan Escobar. "They don't hear now! By the Holy Mother, Señor Brand, you mus' help me!"

"What's that?" Paso jerked out in amazement.

Escobar shifted into excited Spanish. "The señorita! Ah, so quickly am I loving her! She must go to her father! He must be helped!"

A long silent breath escaped Paso. So Kitty Gardner had put it over.

"I help you, an' then get your knife in my back?" he said skeptically.

"*Por Dios*, no! How could I kill the man who helped the girl I love? *Amigo*, the past is dead! How this happened I do not know. I am mad with love. She is an angel. A little dove, so helpless, so *bonita*, so . . . so—"

"Don't gag on all that sweet talk," Paso said dryly as he slipped the knife back under his belt. "After she's safe we can listen to it. Got an extra gun?"

"Only my rifle," Escobar confessed glumly. "And they are four."

"Four ain't so many. Two of them are ridin' up ahead with the pack mules. Gimme your six-gun. Use that knife you were savin' for me, an' then your rifle."

"*Amigo*," said Juan Escobar in a voice that shook, "the señorita and I will never forget your friendship!"

"Every time you call me '*amigo*,'" said Paso, "I get boogery and don't believe it. We'll get drunk together if we come out of this. Maybe then it'll sound all right." He tensed. "What's that?"

Paso wheeled his horse to the back trail and cocked the six-gun as a low voice cautiously whispered. "Señor Brand?"

"Who is it?"

"Tony Ramos."

"Hell, I must be drunk already!" Paso exclaimed. "Where'd you come from?"

Tony Ramos appeared magically under the nose of Paso's horse. Afoot, he had approached with Indianlike stealth.

"Two of us have followed," Tony Ramos said cautiously. "Who ees thees man?"

"A friend. We're fixin' to help Miss Gardner escape."

"I theenk I hear so when I listen

to you," Ramos said. "How many mus' we keel?"

"Four—an' damn good men."

"You wait."

Tony Ramos vanished again. Even Paso could not hear him leave. Minutes later two horses came along the trail. Tony Ramos rode one; the guard who had vanished with him at the fight was on the other.

"Follow us," Paso directed after describing what was ahead. "Watch out for Miss Gardner. She'll be right in front of the first trouble."

PASO still found all this hard to believe as he rode on behind Juan Escobar. "Yuh finished him off mighty quiet," Lon Purdy's voice called as they rode up.

"Oh, si," said Juan Escobar.

"Ride back here with Jake. I'm going up front."

"One minute, señor," said Escobar, reining over beside Jake.

Paso spurred hard, was up beside Lon Purdy before the man realized the second horse still carried a rider.

"What the hell!" Purdy blurted as Paso chopped hard with the gun barrel, trying to knock Purdy out. Purdy's head jerked, the weapon struck his shoulder, and he was drawing his own gun in the same instant.

A strangled cry ended in a gasp behind Paso—and he dragged his gun barrel down over Purdy's shoulder and triggered.

At that it was almost too late. Purdy's shot followed an instant later as the man was blasted back. But he was already a dying man shooting wildly. As Purdy plunged into the darkness, Paso spurred forward.

"Ride back!" he called as he passed Kitty Gardner.

Ahead Joe Purdy shouted: "Lon, are yuh all right?" When no answer

came, red flame spit at Paso. A second gun joined in as Paso rushed at them with his own gun blasting.

The pack animals were snorting and rearing away. An unearthly, screeching, Indian yell lifted behind from Tony Ramos. A bullet grazed Paso's arm. He fired his last shot and snatched the knife from his belt just as he reached the gunman who had shot him.

The man was a dark weaving blot on a rearing horse. Paso leaned over and stabbed hard as he rode by—and set himself for the shot he expected. The knife went in to the hilt and was torn from Paso's hand. And there was no shot.

Paso heard the other outlaw galloping off through the low brush off the trail. With a whoop, Tony Ramos followed. And when Paso wheeled back to meet the man he had stabbed he found an empty saddle.

Guns began to fire from where Tony Ramos had ridden. Then a distant yell of triumph told that Tony had caught his man.

It was over that quickly. The pack mules had run off the trail. Paso and the guard who had come with Tony Ramos went after them. Tony galloped up to help.

"Tree dead, one *muy malo*," Ramos called.

Juan Escobar was comforting Kitty Gardner when they were all together again on the trail. The lanky Tonopah, who had been shot through the mouth, had just died.

"Miss Gardner, we'll get you to Three Forks first," said Paso.

"Not now. I've got to know how my father is."

"I won't argue," Paso yielded. "An' I guess the mine has got word out for help long ago. The best we can do is kill these horses getting

back there and hope we're in time. Baxter wasn't figuring on doing anything until long after daylight. Maybe late in the day. We'll have to hide the gold as soon as it gets daylight. If Baxter wipes out the Concho, there ain't any use carrying the gold back to him."

"I teenk so, too," agreed Tony Ramos.

TWO hours later, in the first gray light of dawn, north of the Border and west of the old Diamond O Ranch, they stopped to cache the gold in a little side canyon. At the foot of a little rock slide they laid the heavy leather sacks, and covered them with rocks until the spot looked natural. Miles farther on, they unsaddled the pack mules, turned them loose and continued the hard grim ride into the north.

Hour by hour Kitty Gardner visibly drooped with increasing weariness. But when Paso halted to give her rest, she insisted on going on toward the Concho.

Juan Escobar rode beside Kitty. His attention was unflagging. Concern, devotion were in his every look and speech. Paso, watching, felt sorry for the handsome young Mexican. Kitty Gardner couldn't be blamed for encouraging him, but the truth was going to be a bitter pill.

Tony Ramos was guiding them. He had been through this country and knew it well. And Paso tried not to think of what would happen this time if they again met the Baxter bunch. The dead outlaw had furnished them with plenty of cartridges and guns. But four men couldn't hold off the Baxter bunch.

The mid-morning sun was high and bright when Paso recognized the low harsh hills ahead. "Not far now," he said to Tony Ramos.

"Not far, señor."

Half an hour later, from a high ridge they were crossing, Paso saw a little plume of dark smoke some miles ahead. Under that smoke would be the Concho mill and rest and help.

"The mine ain't blowed up yet, anyway. I guess we're all right now," Paso cheered them.

That wasn't exactly so. The closer they got to the mine, the nearer they were to the Baxter gunmen.

They were riding up a deep brushy draw when the keen eyes of Tony Ramos first discovered trouble. Ramos whipped up his rifle and fired to the left, at the top of the high slope.

CHAPTER XVI

SHOWDOWN

PASO had his rifle up even before he saw what Ramos was shooting at. His sights swung over a magnificent cream-colored horse that was being savagely reined around at the top of the slope. Sonora Riley must have ridden out into view there without knowing anyone was down in the draw.

Tony Ramos had missed his hurried shot. Paso's finger was squeezing the trigger—and suddenly he couldn't put a bullet in that horse. In another moment Riley was out of sight. They heard him fire three quick shots. His yell drifted back. "Ride like hell!" Paso had already cried.

Tony Ramos called a wry reproof to Paso as their tired horses burst into full gallop.

"I t'eenk you moch better shoot that horse then, *amigo!* Ees better he die than you!"

Paso nodded. A minute later Tony Ramos looked back and grimly jerked a thumb. Behind them Sonora Riley and three other riders were racing down into the draw. As

Paso looked, two more men flashed over the crest and followed. And then another. Then a turn in the draw cut off sight of the pursuit for the moment.

But you could be sure Baxter hadn't let his men scatter much. They'd all be coming on fresher horses that had rested some. The broken country gave cover of a sort, but it made the going harder for tiring horses.

Twice guns opened up behind them for brief moments when they were in sight. Then the long serpentine draw narrowed sharply, and they drove their horses up the steep side. Behind them guns burst out again. Over his shoulder Paso saw a dozen riders trying to keep up with Sonora Riley's great horse. And more were coming.

"Ramos!" Paso shouted. "Try to get Miss Gardner to the mine! The rest of you back me up!"

Paso swung from the saddle as he topped the draw slope and opened fire. Juan Escobar and the mine guard were throwing shots beside him an instant later.

It caught the Baxter men by surprise. Two of them dropped and a horse went down before the outlaws swerved up the side of the draw.

"Now they'll be more careful!" Paso growled as he hit the saddle again and spurred on.

Ramos and Kitty Gardner were already out of sight. Paso was satisfied. Now the outlaws would have to pass the three of them before they could overtake the girl.

It had turned into a running fight now through the harsh broken foothills. The gunfire came in crackling bursts as the pursuit sighted them, lost them, and sighted them again and again.

The lathered horses were blowing hard and weakening fast when Paso

saw the mine smokestack not more than a mile away. Kitty Gardner would have covered half that mile already.

"Ride for it!" Paso yelled as guns opened up on them again.

NOW he saw that they were south of the mine, south of the road, in the broken little hills through which the creek from the mine camp ran. A short run and they'd reach the creek—and as Paso thought that, a bullet knocked his horse over at full gallop.

Paso kicked himself from the saddle as the horse fell, and the rifle was knocked from his hand as he struck the ground hard at one side and rolled helplessly.

The horse came to a kicking stop in a cloud of dust. Paso scrambled back on hands and knees for his rifle. A knifelike pain told of the bad sprain there in his hand. At that moment Juan Escobar hit the ground beside him.

"On my horse!" he cried in English.

"Ride on, you fool!" Paso shouted. "Your horse won't carry two of us!" He lurched over behind his dying horse, knelt and opened fire on the crescent line of outlaws galloping at them. And Juan Escobar stood calmly in his tracks and started to shoot also.

"By hell, you're a man!" Paso jerked out in admiration.

"I am a friend, Señor Brand, because you have helped me," Juan Escobar retorted.

The guard galloped back and joined them. "I might as well lose my hair, too," he called.

Now the outlaws were close—a dozen and a half of them—a wave of hard angry killers fired by the knowledge that their gold must be

gone. And well out ahead of all of them rode Sonora Riley; lean, grim, dangerous.

Paso got his rifle sights on Riley and squeezed the trigger. He missed. It would be far easier to knock the cream stallion over. But Paso locked his teeth and sighted on Riley again.

Bullets were whistling about them. Behind, Juan Escobar's horse staggered away and fell heavily as Paso shot again. And Sonora Riley flung himself up and back in the saddle and clutched for support.

Juan Escobar's rifle cracked sharply. Riley's horse had stopped. Riley pitched out of the saddle and the stallion stood there with the reins dragging as the other outlaws began to scatter to circle the three men on foot.

"I think," said Juan Escobar in Spanish, "it is not long now. Look! More of them!"

The young Mexican had swung his gun toward a wooded slope not a hundred and fifty yards away on the right. On that slope, bursting into the open, came a second wave of riders, spurring toward them.

A dozen—two dozen armed men—still more were pouring down the slope.

"Don't shoot, Juan!" Paso yelled. "That's Tony Ramos riding in front! And that's Horgan from the mine! They're *all* from the mine!"

Until then Paso had not seen Shorty Baxter. Now he made out the venomous little outlaw leader on a big black horse that pulled up sharply as Baxter shouted orders to his men.

But a rolling storm of gunfire from the mine riders and the thunder of their charge drowned out all sounds. The outlaw charge had already broken. One man turned back. Another followed him.

Half a dozen other men who were galloping over to Shorty Baxter lost their nerve and spurred away in retreat when they saw how they were outnumbered. Yesterday the Concho had not had this many armed riders. Only Shorty Baxter stood his ground. Hunched on the big black horse he poured shot after shot from his rifle. And when you knew the emaciated little gunman's hate, you could see that he was firing only at Jules Horgan, who led the charge toward him.

Paso was feverishly reloading. But Juan Escobar beat him to it. Standing coolly, Juan Escobar took careful aim with his rifle and fired. And Shorty Baxter fell not fifty yards from where Sonora Joe Riley lay in the short grass.

SATISFACTION was on Juan Escobar's face as he lowered the rifle and crouched down beside Paso, to whom his flowery Spanish had a note of pathos in its futility.

"Now I theenk my beloved will always be safe," Juan Escobar said, and Paso was sorry he would soon have to learn that the beloved would not be Kitty Gardner.

Tony Ramos threw himself off his lathered horse and joined them. And as the mine men thundered past after the outlaws, they yelled encouragement to Paso and the others.

"The sheriff's men, the ranchers from Tree Forks, the mine men were come to ride out w'en they hear the shooting," Tony Ramos blurted. "Ah, *Dios*, now ees all over!"

Paso staggered as he stood up. Tony Ramos caught his arm. "Señor, ees eet help you need?"

"I sure do," said Paso. "Run out and get that damned white horse before he wanders away. He's mine now an' I'm keeping him."

The hammering stamp mill was shut down, the mine machinery was silent as Paso and the other three men rode to the gate in the wire. Only armed miners on foot were there to greet them.

And while excited questions were asked and answered, Juan Escobar cried, "Where ees the Señorita Gardner?"

"With her old man, I reckon. That's where she headed," one of the miners told him.

"Señor, I must see her!" Juan Escobar appealed to Paso.

"I reckon you might as well get it over with," Paso agreed. "I'll take you."

Outside the mine office Juan Escobar helped Paso down and supported him on the injured ankle as they went inside. The door of Gardner's room was closed.

"Wait back there in the office," Paso directed.

When he was alone, Paso knocked, turned the knob and limped in. Kitty Gardner jumped from the edge of the bed where she had been holding her father's hand. She stared at Paso as if he were a ghost, then color flooded into her face.

"Are you all safe? Were they in time?" she asked anxiously.

Gardner's face was half hidden in bandages, but he looked better. His voice was stronger as he said:

"Thank God, you got through all right, Brand. And got here when you did. A little more and all the riders would have been gone, looking for Kitty. What's happening out there?"

"Baxter's dead," Paso said. "And so's Sonora Riley. The others are hightailin' it with your men after them."

"So Baxter's dead?" Gardner said heavily. "Well, that saves me a job

hunting him down later on. Kitty's just told me what you've all been through."

Kitty Gardner's color was fading again. Her eyes were big, frightened. "The rest of you—" she faltered.

"We're all right," said Paso, grinning. "But you've got a problem in young Escobar. He's head over heels in love. It'll take a lot of talkin' to make him ever think different."

"I don't want him ever to think different! I love him! Where is he?" Kitty cried, turning to the door.

Paso's mouth was open soundlessly as she left the room, running toward the office. Silently he questioned Gardner with a look and got a nod in return.

"I reckon it's so," the mine owner conceded. "Kitty says he's from a good family and swears they both fell in love in a few hours. Know anything about him, Paso?"

"His family's good enough," said Paso. "Plenty good." He coughed and put up his hand to hide a grin. "Hell, yes! We're friends. Mighty good friends."

"I guess it's all right then," Gardner decided with relief. "Maybe it'd have to be all right anyway, the way Kitty feels." He chuckled ruefully. "I didn't bank on getting a son-in-law out of all this. But I guess it's all right. I've talked to Ben Davis, and Kitty has told me what Ramos did. I'll take care of those two men. They're the kind I need. You too, Paso."

"Thanks," Paso said, and chuckled. "Gardner, your daughter got a husband out of this, you got a son-in-law, and I got the best damn horse a man ever rode. So I guess everybody's happy."

THE FIGHTING HEART



By JACK STERRETT

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GAUNT old Sheriff Bill Bragg balanced a sawed-off shotgun in the crook of his elbow. Downstreet, he could hear the gathering roar of an infuriated crowd. His blue eyes were sparkling ice as he spoke over his shoulder to the two deputies following behind him with a handcuffed man.

"Cut through this lot an' take the prisoner down the alley to that new Big Rock stable," he ordered. "We haven't got time to reach the jail, but there's only a front an' rear entrance to that barn an' no windows. I reckon we'll stand the crowd off there in better shape than here."

Bragg looked back for a moment, gazed unwinkingly at the whimpering, scared-looking man who was manacled between the two grim deputies. "You two," he added, "can guard the rear entrance to the barn. I'll stand shotgun in front. If the mob should rush me, give the prisoner a gun an' let 'im die like a man."

The lean, big-shouldered lawman turned and walked out into the blazing sun of the middle of the street. Behind him, the deputies slipped the prisoner through a vacant lot and doubled back swiftly down the alley toward the stable.

The mob of a hundred men was boiling around the corner, a block behind, as the sheriff stepped slowly across the street and into a store. A few of them saw him and were puzzled by his actions. By the time the hooting crowd had rounded up in front of the store and a half dozen

men had stormed through the building to find it empty, someone had sensed the old man's strategy.

"They've taken that hombre to the Big Rock stable," he yelled.

With a howl, the crowd wheeled in its tracks and ran down the street. But, by that time, Sheriff Bragg had circled them and taken up his position on the edge of the sidewalk in front of the yawning, dark door of the new barn.

The crowd lined up across the street. Late comers forced the leaders into the middle of the road. Sheriff Bragg settled his hat, unslung his scattergun from the crook of his elbow and swiveled its blunt, ugly muzzles, chest-high, across the hesitating forefront of the crowd. Pressing back against the whooping, surging men at their rear, they eyed the old lawman warily.

They stared at a gaunt six-footer with a face of battered, rough-hewn granite that mounted jutting jaws and nose, a pair of glittering, ice-blue eyes and a silvery longhorn mustache. He was dressed in black—frock coat, trousers, boots and wide-brimmed hat. A black, string tie hung loosely on his white shirt front, and the gold and silver of his star shone dully.

Bill Bragg was an old man, so old and scarred that the lines in his face seemed deep knife-thrusts. Beneath his tan, his skin looked yellow. But his big, gnarl-knuckled fists were as steady as stone and there was a confidence in his calm, cold pose that

held those facing him, momentarily, as though hog-tied.

THE men at the rear of the crowd were yelling, waving their six-guns, stamping their cowhide boots. They were pushing and craning to see. Their cowboy yelps and Comanche shrieks were building high the lynch fever in liquor-goaded brains. The front rank was shoved forward, but Bragg's deadly stare and weaving, menacing weapon brought them to a halt again. He lifted his voice in a clear and commanding cry that cut through the sullen roar as the wind cuts smoke.

"Hold it, boys! I'm loaded for bear. By hell, you can kill me. Sure. But I'll take at least six of you to hell on a buckshot toboggan!"

Those directly exposed to the ugly gape of the sheriff's big weapon betrayed no eagerness to hurry the matter. They showed signs of regretting the ungoverned impulses that had churned them into their hellish predicament.

"That little sneak in the barn'll get his," the sheriff continued, "but he'll get it in the way the law allows. It ain't worth your lives to try an' argue me out o' that."

"Damn it, sheriff"—it was the bawling voice of a flashily dressed, dark-faced man near the center in front—"we been laying to get that killing thief as soon as you brought him in and we're going to hang him today! Now!"

Bragg fixed the speaker with his icy, grim stare. He shifted his shotgun so as to afford the fellow a good look into its yawning, black barrels.

"You the leader of this mob, Lom?" he asked coldly. "Well, then, make up your mind. Either you turn around an' walk away—or you come ahead an' die. By hell, Lom,

I'll be shootin' straight at you! Is the lynchin' of that rustler worth the price?"

Lom Ritter chewed at his wet lips nervously. His black eyes bulged as he glared at the immovable old man. "That goes double," he answered with a snarl. "Is it worth *your* life to save the pup for a legal hanging?"

"It is," Bragg said flatly.

Ritter hesitated—and was lost. With a sudden, sharp curse, he whirled on his heels and forced his way roughly into the crowd. A half dozen in front made haste to follow.

The crowd fell silent and began to break up. Deprived of their leadership, the expressions of many showed their wonder as to how the hell they came to be there, anyway. They drifted away with shamefaced, sidelong glances at the old sheriff. A few cleared their throats uncomfortably and apologized to him. In five minutes the street was clear.

Bragg lowered his shotgun to the ground and leaned on it. He clung to the weapon so tightly that his hands were chalky around the knuckles. A familiar and dread sensation was creeping through his vitals, stabbing him with a deadly pain and nausea. There was a horrible, vibrating choking at his heart.

Standing there, the old man kept his face like a mask. His desperate grasp on his gun kept him erect and still. Nobody, watching him, could possibly have guessed that he was in the grip of agonizing pain.

LATE that afternoon Lom Ritter knocked on the door of Sheriff Bill Bragg's office. He turned the knob without awaiting an answer, closed the door roughly behind him. There was a look of insolence on his darkly handsome face

as he slouched across the room and sat down in front of Bragg.

"Well," Lom said roughly, "I'm not in the habit of coming on the run when anybody sends for me. What do you want?" He had come unarmed and he seemed to think that he could therefore insult the sheriff with impunity.

There was a strange lack of color beneath the tan on Bragg's leathery face, but his big hands were steady on the edge of his desk and he showed no resentment. "I'm thinkin', Lom," he said quietly, "that you an' me should get down to cases as to who caused the lynch uprisin' to-day."

Ritter opened his full, slightly too-handsome lips in a snarl, but Bragg's eyes went suddenly cold. Their savage thrust demanded silence, and Lom's mouth hung open without issuing sound.

"You been passin' in this town as an honest an' influential citizen, but I've learned that, in a roundabout way, you engineered that mob," Bragg accused flatly. "You saw that liquor was supplied the men an' stirred up the arguments to fan that lynchin' fire. Well, it's too bad for you that the thing backfired. If the lynchin' had worked, my office would've been discredited an' you might've been successful in bein' elected to sheriff in my place by the element that's backin' you."

"You're an old man," Ritter began.

"Shut up!" Bragg snapped, and Lom's face went white under the impact of the old lawman's eyes.

"Like you say," the sheriff admitted surprisingly, "I'm an old man. I aim to retire."

A look of startled satisfaction flooded Lom's face. "Why, then—"

"Hold on," Bragg said grimly. "That don't mean that I'm turnin'

my office over to you an' the pack of outlaws that are aimin' to move in along with you. It means that I've discussed the problem with the honest ranchers of the region an' that we'll back my head deputy, Roy Kruger, for the office."

A look of black fury convulsed Lom Ritter's face. "By hell," he muttered passionately, "we'll fight! What's more, we'll win. I'll be the next sheriff of this county."

Bragg's cold eyes were fixed on him stonily. "Yeah," he admitted, "that's what I'm afraid of. If I could run again, personal, I reckon I could beat you. But Kruger's new here. He ain't as well knowned as he should be to run a good race. But there's one way, sure, that I can prevent your election, Lom, an' leave the field clear for Kruger. I can kill you."

It was said so quietly that Lom Ritter gaped for a second without understanding. Then his face went chalky and sweat stood out suddenly on his forehead. Hands trembling, he came half out of his seat.

"You can't shoot me! I'm not armed. I haven't got a chance!"

"That poor devil in jail," Bragg said coldly, "wouldn't have had a chance if you could've got 'im away from me today. I've got all but the kind of proof that'll stand in court that you've killed other men that had no chance."

Lom's lips were wet and trembling. "You can't shoot me," he repeated nervously.

"I'm not aimin' to right now," said Bragg. "I'll give you a couple of hours to think it over." He glanced at the clock on the wall. "At seven o'clock, I'll meet you at Haney's saloon—or you'll be out o' town an' on your way clear out o' the county until after election."

Relief was plain on Lom Ritter's

white face as he edged toward the door. "I c-can go now, then?"

BRAGG waved him out. He did not look up as the door to an inner room was opened almost immediately. The sickly, yellow tinge to his skin had suddenly grown almost ghastly. He looked like a man who sat at the point of death. His big hands clutched desperately at the edge of his desk, and his breath came in short, hard gasps.

The man who had entered waited quietly until the spasm that had seized the old lawman had passed away. His brown, spectacled eyes showed deep worry and sympathy. "It's pretty bad, eh, Bill?" he asked gently.

Bragg relaxed but his grin was weak. "Another of those," he whispered, "an' I reckon I'm finished." He drummed his fingers on the edge of his desk and the look in his eyes grew meditating. It was as though he looked far into the past.

"Doc, you an' me been here a long time," he said thoughtfully. "In the old days we cleaned out a lot of outlaw hellions. It was a hard scrap. I guess I swallowed too much lead, off an' on. But I kept this county clean." His lips twisted. "Now there's outlaws tryin' to sneak in on me again. Doc, it's a hell of a note to have to die now!"

"You go to bed like I've been telling you," Doc Bayley said gravely, "and you might live for a month. You stay on your feet and you'll die tomorrow or by the end of the week at the very latest. Your wild chase after this rustler in jail here was too much for you."

"The old heart hasn't any fight left, huh?"

"You took a .45 slug into your chest ten years ago that didn't do you any good," the doctor reminded

him. "It's still in there right next to your heart and now, at last, it's killing you. It can't be taken out."

"Well," Bragg said, smiling grimly. "I'm not goin' to bed. So I guess I'll just have to die."

Doc Bayley was nearly as old as Sheriff Bragg. His brown eyes looked dim behind their spectacles. He shrugged with a deep sigh. "I heard what you said to Lom Ritter. You're going to take a gun to him at Haney's?"

"No," Bragg said quietly, "I think I'll go down there unarmed."

Bayley's mouth fell open. "That's suicide!" he cried. "Lom'll have his gang behind him. With backing and with a gun in his hands, he won't scare."

"Suicide?" Bragg stared at him oddly. "It'd be murder, wouldn't it—if Lom should shoot me while I was unarmed?"

Doc Bayley sat down heavily. He stared at Bragg. "You'd go that far," he asked slowly, "to prevent Lom Ritter from becoming sheriff?"

"A man convicted of murder," Bragg nodded, "can't run for office. With Lom out of the way an' Roy Kruger elected, there won't be an outlaw left in this county within a month."

Bayley said nothing for a long moment. His face was white. At last he spoke slowly. "You want me to be there—me and Roy Kruger and maybe a couple of others—hid out so we can witness that murder. That's how you want it, isn't it? Well," he shouted suddenly, "I won't do it! I won't let *you* do it! I'll tell Lom or Kruger!"

Bragg stared at him a long, long time without speaking. And in the end it was Bayley's gaze that turned away.

"No, you won't warn Lom," Bragg said softly. "An' you'll tell Kruger

only enough so's he'll be there. You'll do what I'm askin', doc, for old time's sake. You love this country as much as I do. We've lived an' fought here, side by side, for thirty years. In the old days, there was plenty of times when either of us could've been killed. An' we'd be glad to go that way, 'cause we were doin' our duty. Doc! I've only got days to go. You said it, yourself!"

Bayley's white face seemed carved from stone. His stiff lip barely moved. "All right . . . Bill," he whispered.

Bragg's gaunt face suddenly lighted. His smile was wide and shaky and his hands trembled. He cleared his throat heavily, but there was nothing he could say. There was nothing that either could say, just then.

TWO hours later, Sheriff Bill Bragg stood alone on the edge of the sidewalk in darkness. He and Doc Bayley had said good-by. He took a deep breath, pulled back his shoulders in a straight, square line and turned down the street. Two blocks away, he could see the murky, smoky light that streamed over the batwing doors of Haney's place. There were a half dozen other saloons along the way, but Bragg's gaze remained fixed on that one light.

Surrounded by a knot of hard-faced, sullen men, Lom Ritter was waiting by the hitch rack in front of the saloon. Backed up by his heavily armed followers, he stepped into the light as the sheriff drew near. Bragg halted and looked at him.

There was no trace of fear in Lom Ritter now. He swaggered, displaying the bone-handled .45s that swung at his hips. "Well, I'm here. I reckon you thought I'd run."

"No," said Bragg, "I knew you'd stand if you could round up a pack of coyotes to back you."

"You said you'd come shooting," Ritter blustered. "Where's your guns?"

The sheriff had been standing so that his coat fell open, disclosing the fact that he wore no gun belt. "I changed my mind about that, Lom," he said. "Fact is, I don't want to take a gun to you at all." He looked around at Lom's wary-eyed, ugly hard-cases. "I'd like to talk to you here in private."

Lom drew a bone-handled gun with a sudden jerk. He stepped up close and ran his left hand over the sheriff's body. He stepped away with a harsh laugh. "He isn't even packing a knife! Go on into the saloon, you hombres. I reckon he's lost his nerve, but I might as well hear what he has to say."

Ritter slouched against the hitch rack, sneering and confident, his hands near his guns as he waited for the sheriff to speak. Bragg turned his back to the saloon, moved out of the light a step or two. He began to mumble in a voice so low that Lom was forced to move out of the light, also, in order to hear him.

The words that Lom heard, pouring slowly and icily from Bragg's stiff lips, caused the gunman's face to go suddenly livid. He jumped away and a gun flashed up in his fist. "By hell," he burst out savagely, "you can't speak that way to me!"

The hammer of Lom's big gun reared back. His finger was crooked to the trigger. Then, suddenly, there was something in Bragg's face that paralyzed his furious action.

There had been a mocking smile on Bragg's lips, a waiting, an almost eagerly expectant look in his eyes. Now, abruptly, the scarred old face

was frozen by a ghastly fear, convulsed by a sharp, stabbing pain.

Bragg stiffened as though stabbed by a red-hot knife. His grim lips flew open in agony. "Lom! Lom!" He was staggering, fighting desperately to stay on his feet. "Hurry up—shoot me!"

Lom stepped away from him with an expression of stupidity and horror. For an instant more, Bragg kept himself erect, a fleeting look of despair on his twisted face. Then he collapsed, pitching forward from the sidewalk into the dark dust.

Lom was staring down in amazement, his gun hung loosely in his hand, when a rush of dark figures slammed into him. There was a sharp curse. His gun roared as it was snatched from his hand. Almost instantly, his other holster was empty. A gun barrel slashed his skull.

A TALL young man stood over Lom's unconscious and handcuffed form. He swung a pair of big six-guns in the faces of the crowd that had come flocking out of

Haney's and other saloons along the street. His square-jawed face was frozen with determination and there was a cold, fearless slash to his eyes.

"Stand back," he ordered curtly. "There ain't a man of you that'll lay a hand on Ritter to free him—nor to lynch him! He's going to jail and he'll have the trial that the law allows. The sheriff didn't have a chance," he added bitterly. "He was sick or somethin'. He wasn't even armed. But Ritter shot him even while we was fighting to get his gun out of his fist!"

Doc Bayley was huddled in the dark by the body of his old friend. He did not look up as he heard Roy Kruger's words. Well—there was a lot about this thing that Kruger would never know. He would make a fine sheriff. It was just as well that he didn't know everything that had led up to this or that had happened just now. As, for instance, the fact that Bill Bragg had been dead before his body fell. And the fact that it had been Doc Bayley's finger that had pressed the trigger of Lom Ritter's gun.

THE END.



The Story of the West



WHEN William Becknell again hit the Santa Fe Trail in 1822 he took three wagons with him and proved the route practicable for heavy freight. But it was not until 1824 that wagons were first used in any quantity. In that year Colonel Marmaduke, later governor of Missouri, and a party of eighty traders made the crossing with an assortment of pack mules and twenty-five wagons, carts and carriages.

The motley assemblage carried some twenty-five thousand to thirty thousand dollars' worth of merchandise, a large portion of it being in bleached and unbleached domestic cotton goods.

This band converged from Independ-

ence and other points in Missouri at Council Grove. Here lean frontiersmen in buckskin leaned on their rifles while fustian-frocked merchants busily oversaw the repacking of goods for the long trek to Santa Fe.

Teamsters in flannel-sleeved vests cut and hewed trees for prospective repairs on the road and secured the timbers beneath the bodies of the wagons. City-bred traders loaded their double-barreled fowling pieces with buckshot in preparation for possible encounters with hostile Indians. Blacksmiths' forges glowed, wheelwrights made last-minute examinations and repairs, and all was hustle, bustle and excitement.

told in pictures and text by **GERARD DELANO**



From Independence, where most of the party had outfitted, to Santa Fe was approximately eight hundred miles of practically unbroken prairie, except for the timbered fringes of the streams, and there was constant danger of Indian attacks.

At last all was ready and to the gleeful cracking of whips, the rattle of chains, creaking of wheels and the rumble of wagons, the caravan lined out and rolled along.

As the train proceeded across the prairie there was a sudden popping of firearms among those out in front as they cleared the trail of rattlesnakes so the mules would not be bitten. Here and

there along the trail great quantities of the snakes were found, the ground fairly writhing with them.

This caravan experienced no great difficulty in following the route, nor were they molested by the Indians, but reached Santa Fe safely, the wheels of the heavy wagons having written Western history in the sod and sand.

At Santa Fe the traders realized a handsome profit on their cargo and returned in the fall with the receipts. These were partly in gold dust and coins, and partly in furs, buffalo rugs and mules.

NEXT WEEK: AN INLAND SEA

The Wild Horse Meets His Match

BY ALLAN K. ECHOLS

IN the good old days a wild-horse catcher was the tops of all cowpokes and horsemen. A wild horse is about the smartest of all wild animals, and the hardest to trap. Men would work and plan for days and weeks just to catch one wild horse that caught their fancy.

Then, for a time, when horse breeding sprang up and animals could be raised cheaper than they could be caught and broken, the wild horse had a rest from the men who wanted to put a loop around his neck. They multiplied and nobody cared. Many were killed outright just to get rid of them, and for their meat, bones and skin.

Then came the rodeos, and the demand for wild horses was reborn. In the old days the breaking of a bad horse was just a tough job, born of the need for the horse; today wild horses are ridden for the entertainment of crowds at the rodeos. A few years ago a horse that couldn't be ridden was a liability and a nuisance; today he is worth a lot of money, and the meaner he is the more money he is worth. So his free-and-easy life is in jeopardy again.

But this time the odds are against him. He hasn't a chance to keep his freedom if a horse catcher wants him. And the horse catcher is not the same man he was fifty years ago. In the old days a top horse breaker would set out with grub and a string of horses and take months to round up a few wild ones. But today he jumps in an airplane and does the job in a few hours.

The Salmon River country in Idaho, the Owyhee Desert on the Nevada-Oregon line, and the country around Ismay, Montana, where the wild horses roam, is seeing them picked up in short order.

In a likely valley where the wild herds are known to roam, men build a corral trap just like in the old days, a high-fenced corral with wide wings running outward from the gate.

Then a pilot in an airplane flies over the country, spots the herd, and swoops low over it, frightening it and setting it running in the direction of the trap. The animals can't outrun it, and they can't turn to right or left, for the aviator swoops and dives behind them and gives them no choice in the direction they may take. They are as helpless as fish in a net.

When the horses are driven in and the corral gates are closed on them, buyers for rodeos pick out the best ones for exhibition purposes. The scrubs are sold to packers, who slaughter them like beef, selling the hides for leather and the meat, frozen in cans, for food for animals.

Thus the romantic wild stallion is following the free range into history.

BIG GEORGE LIGHTS UP



BY E. C. LINCOLN

BIG GEORGE LIGHTS UP

BY E. C. LINCOLN

BUT what I don't see," grumbled Sheriff Bill Peters, "is why you guys got to go fishin' on Squaw Crick an' nowhere else. I tell yuh that country ain't healthy, Willie."

His two visitors grinned at him tolerantly. "An' we jest explained right careful," answered the one he had addressed as "Willie," an undersized individual hardly bigger than a fourteen-year-old boy. "Big here caught a three-n'-a-half-pound rainbow on Squaw Crick five year ago jest below Sam Blake's old cabin on th' Z Up-an'-down. An' he ain't quit talkin' about it since. I want to give him a chance to git it out of his system. We ain't got a thing t' do atween now an' the Pendleton show. What's wrong with Squaw Crick, anyways?"

"Yeah, Bill, what's so durn unhealthy about it?" rumbled the second of the sheriff's visitors, a giant close to two hundred and fifty pounds in weight, so tall that he had to stoop, now, to keep the peak of his battered Stetson from hitting the top of the doorway.

The sheriff glanced over at his young deputy, who nodded slightly. "It ain't Squaw Crick," the sheriff said slowly, "it's that Squaw Crick runs through the Z Up-an'-down, an' the Z Up ain't what she used to be when you boys knowed her. Jest atween ourselves, th' U. S. marshal sent my new deperty here, down from Helena to sorter keep an eye on the place. A feller from Detroit, name's Meyer, bought it three year

ago, an' we ain't over fond of his looks. Fired all th' old help an' brought in a tough-looking bunch. Don't welcome visitors none whatever. Goes round with a side-kick that looks more like a gorilla 'an he does a man. Now an' then guys drop off th' train, an' he meets 'em at the station. Sometimes we see 'em again, sometimes not. Fact is, boys, folks has a notion the old Z Up's jest a hide-out for some Eastern bunch when things git too hot for 'em back home."

Willie Joe's leathery face wrinkled with amusement, and his partner, Big George Griffin burst into a roar of laughter. "Heck, Bill," said the latter, "we ain't goin' to bother no hide-out, we're goin' fishin'. Jest dropped in to see could you tell us had we better use hoppes or flies, an' you hand us all this stuff that ain't none of our business nohow. You're goin' t' eat trout for breakfast, sheriff. We'll stop by your house when we git home this evenin'."

So saying, the giant nodded his head, waved a rope-scarred hand big enough to span a water bucket, and crowded out through a doorway which seemed all too narrow for his passage. His tiny companion grinned as if to say the case was hopeless, jammed his hat onto his bald, birdlike head, and stumped after him, his pint-sized figure a ludicrous contrast to his friend's tremendous frame.

The sheriff watched them go, and his faded old blue eyes puckered

thoughtfully. "Still," he said half aloud, "them guys ought t' be able t' handle any trouble comes their way, if anybody kin."

"Who are they?" asked the young deputy.

THE sheriff's eyes opened wide with astonishment. "Don't you know 'em?" he queried. "Where yuh been all your life? Was yuh ever in the cow business you'd know 'em all right. Them two fellers is Willie Joe Cummings an' Big George Griffin, that's all; an' they're pretty durn near as historic as George Washington or Abe Lincoln is."

"Looked like range bums to me," said the deputy, unimpressed.

"Range bums!" the sheriff exploded. "Say, them guys has got all the money in th' world, spite o' them worn-out boots an' patched Levis, an' lids that was new when Taft was president. Why, you'll hear fellers tellin' about them two wherever there's a roundup fire burnin' nights. Best team ever made a rep from Medicine Hat t' th' Rio. Six years ago they was punchin' cows fer forty a month. Got tired workin' for the other feller, so they files on a dry half-section down in Oklahoma. Before they even got settled on the place they'd started to go broke. Then one mawnin' a big oil company digs a hole on their place an' they're rich overnight, an' ever since then, the money rolls in so fast they don't bother to count it."

"You know what they done soon's they hit her? Bought a ten-thousand-acre spread over in New Mexico that's a cowman's paradise. 'Cept there ain't nary a cow. Jest hawses. They stocks that place with every sort of hawse there is an' fills the stables plumb to th' roof with silver-mounted saddles."

"And when they gits tired stayin' home, which they does right frequent, they loads a couple of pet hawses in their private car, pulls on their old clothes, sticks a thousand bucks in their pockets an' starts rollin' up an' down the West—anywhere they takes a notion. Rodeos, barbecues, minin' camps, layouts where they used t' work—any place it looks like things might happen. This here fishin' trip, now, it's jest another case o' their durn foolishness that might mean trouble a-plenty."

The young deputy nodded. How much of the sheriff's windy it was safe to believe he didn't know. Until he had proof he decided privately not to believe any of it. Which shows the ignorance of young deputies.

LESS than an hour after their conversation with Sheriff Bill Peters, Willie Joe and Big George were jogging contentedly along in the afternoon sunshine on a river trail which in the course of another eight miles or so would bring them out at the mouth of Squaw Creek.

Rusty, Big's great rawboned black gelding, seventeen hands in height, shuffled along in the lead, with Willie Joe's little pinto, Fairy, moving after him as if there were calves to rope and he meant to be on hand when the time came.

The trail brought them into the shadows of rough-barked cottonwoods when it dropped from the bench to the river bank; it became a cattle track as it skirted the willow growth of the slews and beaver ponds; then, a mile farther on, Big and Willie drew rein at a new wire fence where the only gate bore a readable "No trespassing" sign.

"Z Up-an'-down's thrown up a real fence," commented the smaller

of the partners. "That sign mean anythin' to us, Big?"

"Not a darn thing," chuckled the giant as he bent down and pried the wire loop from the upright. "We ain't really trespassin' none whatever. 'Course, if Squaw Crick happens to cut this guy's land we can't help it. I aim to wade the crick, anyhow, an' any steppin' on th' Z Up I'll do 'll be plumb accidental. C'mon, Willie; I want t' git started by four o'clock."

Soon they had reached the tongue of land where Squaw Creek joined the river, but the cabin which they found there was in an even worse condition than they had remembered. The walls still stood, but the chinking was gone from between the logs, sunlight shone through the holes in the sagging roof, and cattle had evidently wintered in the place when any shelter was better than none.

Big and Willie stripped the rigging from their horses and turned them loose to graze in the weed-grown clearing, with the understanding that Willie would put them in the corral, which was still in fairly good repair, before sundown.

Then the little man curled himself up in a warm corner of the rotting porch and announced that as he personally didn't see the fun of sloshing through a lot of cold water after a few dumb, half-grown fish, he intended to stay right there till Big got back; which desertion, being expected, troubled his giant partner not at all.

Big George, whistling happily and tunelessly to himself, hunted till he found a willow pole that suited him, dug out a short line and hook from the lining of his Stetson, and badgered Willie Joe into helping him catch hoppers. Then he departed up the creek, Levis rolled to his great

knees, while the icy water from the mountain peaks flowed freely in and out through the holes in his boots.

At the second pool he hooked his first fighter, and from then on Willie Joe, the Z Up-and-down, Sheriff Bill Peter's warning, and even time itself were forgotten.

The sun was well below the jagged wall of the rimrock to the west before Big George emerged from the waters of Squaw Creek, back at Sam Blake's old cabin. A string of a dozen trout that included one fourteen-inch rainbow swung from his fist by a loop of binder twine. The afternoon had been a huge success, and Big wanted Willie to come a-runnin' to see those fish.

But Willie Joe didn't come at the sound of Big's whistle. Willie's cigarette papers were on the porch, and the two horses were in the corral. Willie couldn't be far, Big thought, so he settled himself on the edge of the sagging step to pour the last of the water from his boots. Still there was no sign of Willie.

Big George whistled louder. He waited. Still no answer. At last Big filled his lungs to emit that personal wolf howl which had been known to carry with the wind for slightly over three miles.

Then, of a sudden, he remembered Sheriff Bill and his idea that the Squaw Creek country wasn't healthy, and the breath in his lungs came out in a worried oath. He pulled on his wet boots and began to circle the clearing at an awkward dogtrot, hoping to cut Willie's trail, if there were any, before it was quite dark.

FOR the first few minutes his efforts were fruitless. The tracks of Willie's boots, as Big rounded up the horses, wandered freely among the trodden weeds. At

the corral gate where the ground was soft and wet, the prints of Willie's heels had filled to the top with water. Almost an hour must have passed since they were made, Big reckoned.

Then, casting in a wider circle, he struck a trail that led from the clearing off through the willows and cottonwoods in the general direction of the Z Up-and-down, and there on the trail were Willie's heel prints again.

Big George felt the skin prickle at the back of his neck. Willie hadn't been up on his toes just for the fun of it, he knew. Big bent all his faculties to the task of following those tracks to read their meaning.

For fifty yards he could cover them almost on the run, then they cut sharply into the brush. There the giant lost them. He was breathing hard now, cursing plaintively to himself as he struggled through the undergrowth. But though he picked up one possible clue in the bent and bruised stem of a young quaking aspen he was forced at last to return to the trail and take a chance on working ahead from there.

Almost at once his decision was rewarded. A stone's throw from the point where they had vanished, Willie's tracks appeared again in the moist humus, and with them were other tracks—track of low, flat heels that would be useless in the saddle. How many men Willie had met there in the trail, Big did not know.

No signs of a struggle showed, but Willie's tracks moved off toward the Z Up-and-down, and Willie's stride was none too steady.

Then, just as Big started on a loping run, his quick eye caught something strange in the tangled growth of head-high quakers on his right. Something—something heavy—had been dragged there, and the marks

of its passing were plain. Big forced himself to follow, though his heart hammered in his chest at the thought of what he might find. Hardly a dozen steps had he taken before he reached it, that scar in the damp earth, slightly longer than a man's body.

Yet it couldn't be Willie that they had dragged with them, for Willie's tracks were plain on the trail beyond. Even to Big, averse as he was to the labor of involved reasoning, the puzzle began to present certain possibilities of solution, and he squatted in the semidarkness of the underbrush to see if he could get things straight.

Willie hadn't put up a fight. That meant that for once the old coyote had been taken by surprise. Big almost chuckled at the thought. And if, for instance, Willie had stumbled onto a killing, then the killers would sure want him out of the way. But why hadn't they finished the job right there? That question bothered Big. He shook his head hopelessly, then set off along the trail toward the Z Up-and-down, forcing his great body to a labored run.

As he stumbled over a projecting root, hardly visible in the gloom of the trail, he grunted abuse at himself for not bringing the horses along. He half decided to turn back. Then, reflecting that it would take many precious minutes to throw on the rigging, he hunched his massive shoulders and plunged doggedly ahead.

Five minutes later, when he emerged from the gloom of the cottonwoods, he saw that he was at the border of what had once been a bluejoint meadow. Beyond it, in the gathering dusk, lay the cluster of buildings that was the Z Up-and-down.

Every instinct urged him to drive

ahead regardless, to rush in there and find out what they had done with Willie. But despite the shiver of eagerness that passed through his enormous body, he forced himself to wait while he considered what Willie would do in a situation like this. Willie, he knew, wouldn't rush in without looking over his ground, no matter what the need might be for haste, so Big forced himself to lie flat in the bushes, well hidden by the fringe of young quakers, while he studied the layout.

THE place had grown tremendously since Big had seen it last. The corrals were there, and the log stables and the blacksmith shop and the cookshack, just as he remembered them, but the great hay barn was new. The old bunkhouse was still doing business, though it had been enlarged to twice its former size, and the ranchhouse itself had acquired a covered porch that completely encircled it. A long row of one-room cabins flanked it to the north.

And down below the corrals was a small structure that Big couldn't identify, an icehouse, he thought at first. But when soon each building showed lights, Big changes his mind. The chances were that his "icehouse" housed a gasoline engine which furnished power. Big snorted in disgust. "Dude layout, fer fair," he grunted. "Ain't even tryin' t' play they's cowmen, I bet yuh."

Then as he watched, still undecided what to do, he caught the first faint light of the moon rising above the pine-fringed crest of the rimrock. At the same moment the door of the cookshack swung open, and men began to drift out. Big counted almost a score, too many by far for the needs of the Z Up-and-down, even in the old days.

And these men for the most part didn't look as if they had ever seen a cow, except perhaps in the advertisement for condensed milk. Silk shirts were present in plenty, and fine new Stetsons that never had been dipped in water to make a drinking cup; spurs, too, and soft leather chaps with silver conchas; but there was little that would indicate the crowd of forty-a-month cow nurses that ought to be eating there.

With them came three dogs, two Great Danes ad a half-bred collie, and at the sight of them Big felt the wind and decided to change his position. If a man wanted to slip up on a place, quietly, dogs were a nuisance. Big spent the next ten minutes circling through the brush till he had reached the down-wind side, where the aspen growth approached the new hay barn.

How much delay was safe he did not know. Time passed, and watching through the screen of brush and young sage that extended nearly up to the ranch buildings, Big saw that the men were scattering slowly in small groups, and it seemed to him, though he could hear no words, that they were talking excitedly among themselves. Certainly Willie Joe was not among them, nor was there any figure that suggested the new owner of the place. By a process of elimination, Big decided that both Willie and the man Meyer were at the ranchhouse, and that fact, if it was a fact, was far from helpful.

Big's chances of reaching the ranchhouse unobserved were less than nothing, and he knew it. Even if he escaped observation, the dogs would give the alarm. For an instant Big weighed the possibility of an open approach; then the folly of such an attempt became apparent even to the giant's reasoning. He grumbled softly at himself. Never

in all his life had he so envied Willie's knack of seeing the hole in even a hopeless situation.

Except for the clouded moon and the glow of light from scattered windows the ranch was now in darkness. If those dudes were all busy in one place, Big thought, he might slip in along the buildings without being noticed. And then, so unexpectedly that he almost grunted aloud with delight, a plan came to him.

He wasted no more time. Crawling on hands and knees, he passed the new hay barn and reached the shadow of the shed. Now he could hear the steady drone of an engine. He felt about him in the darkness, and he thrilled in every nerve when his groping hands found the steel barrel that held the reserve supply of fuel. For once he had been right!

He braced himself, and heaved the barrel to his shoulder. Only about forty steps to the hay barn! He forced himself to take his time, and opening the cock he moved carefully about the building till the barrel was empty. Then, on the far side and down-wind, he lit a match.

A moment later he was racing across the open, running for dear life; and when he hurled himself flat in the deeper darkness of the quakers his heart was hammering a tattoo that he felt sure must carry even to the house itself.

Then the deep baying of dogs burst on the night, and a red glow, only a hint of light at first, flared up behind the roof of the cookshack. A crackling like that of many rifles reached Big's ears, and suddenly the open meadow and the beaten earth between the buildings were brighter than day with the dancing light of flames that roared to the sky in a volcano of fire.

Men shouted and dancing shadows raced across the bright spaces. From the pole corrals came the shrill squeal of a horse in terror. Then, with a thunder of hoofs, the saddle stock swept down toward the giant's hiding place, wheeled and charged off in to the bottom lands to the east. Someone who feared the spread of the flames had opened the corral gates, Big guessed, and the Z-Up, he hoped fervently, was now on foot.

Big clambered to his feet, jerked his hat lower over his face, and set off at a dogtrot toward the ranch-house. He crouched slightly as he ran. A dark figure hurrying toward the burning hay barn shouted at him, but Big George only waved an arm and kept on. He reached the house, circled to the rear, and came up on the shadowed side. Then he crawled to the corner of the porch, raised his head cautiously till his eyes were level with the flooring, and sized up the situation.

ALMOST within arms' reach, a mighty brute of a man paced restlessly, and Big grinned at his angry oaths of frustrated entertainment. He might, Big thought, be that bodyguard the sheriff had talked about. Anyway, he was certainly adequate to any form of mayhem.

The fellow was shorter than Big by a good eight inches, but the broad chest and hulking shoulders that rose without a break to the crumpled ears, and the bullet head that sat, almost neckless, deep in that arch of sinew and massive bone, suggested some denizen of the jungle rather than a human being, a suggestion born out by arms so long that the hairy hands hung well below the bent knees. Big heard the knuckles crack like pistol shots as

the man clenched and opened his fists in excitement.

At last the guard seemed to have come to some decision, for he stumped hastily into the house and Big heard him hammering on a closed door. Then his bull voice roared out like a great drum as he shouted to someone inside:

"Hey, boss! Can't yuh let that feller be? The whole place is burnin' up! We need yuh. I ain't goin' to hang round here much longer, boss, neither."

Big could not catch the reply. Whatever it was, it must have been unsatisfactory, for the oaths of the guard doubled in vehemence as he lumbered out again and resumed his post. For the moment he stood watching the leaping flames, his back turned. Big George set his teeth hard as he stood erect; then he vaulted the porch railing.

Big's wet boots thudded on the split logs. The guard whirled, startled, and a snarling grunt of rage burst from his thick lips. The bullet head drew down into the hunched shoulders, and as Big hurled his own two-hundred-and-forty pounds in a headlong dive, the two bodies met with a crashing impact that shook the building.

Then Big felt mighty arms closing about him in a crushing hold that drove the breath from his lungs. For the first time in his life, Big felt a flash of doubt as to his own strength. He went to work, berserk with anger and desperation. In the very instant of contact he sensed an opponent of equal powers, with a skill that exceeded his own.

Though he hurled his body from side to side and fought to free his left arm, already numb with pain as a groping hand sought to force it, into a hammer lock, the viselike hold

seemed to be slowly crushing out his life. His head swam dizzily. White-hot knives of agony plunged again and again into his laboring lungs.

In a last hope he changed tactics suddenly and hugged the man to him. Then he brought up his knee with all his failing strength.

The two giants crashed to the floor still locked together, but it was Big who first found his feet and staggered away, free from the clutching arms. An instant later his right fist cracked solidly on the rocky jaw, and the man reeled backward till the porch railing splintered under his unconscious weight.

Big George had been set for that haymaker. It felt right to him. He wasted no more time on the body-guard. As he filled his lungs and his head cleared, it seemed to him that he had battled for hours. Actually less than thirty seconds had passed since he vaulted the railing, and the flame of the burning hay barn still filled the sky, bathing the ranchhouse with unearthly radiance. Voices still shouted the alarm, but Big did not even hear them. Somewhere inside that house Willie needed him.

Big found himself in a great gable-roofed room, where rugs and pelts covered the floor and antlered heads stared at him from the walls. He stumbled over a low leather couch, hurled a chair from his path, and tore open a door. The shallow closet it opened into was stacked with guns.

Big cursed under his breath and moved on to the next door. When it resisted his efforts he tore the lock from the casing. Behind it, with a dead space of less than three inches, was a second door of heavy timbers, bound across and lengthwise with strap iron.

Big wiped the stinging sweat from his eyes. He swept a clear space behind him, then hurled his shoulder into the barrier with all the strength he had. With a screech of tearing bolts the door gave slightly. From behind it came a startled cry.

A GAIN Big sent his shoulder into the sagging timbers, and when the door crashed down he sprawled on his face in a blinding white light. With the quickness of a cougar he was up again, and all a cougar's fury swept over him at what he saw.

In that cone of glaring light sat Willie Joe, bound hand and foot to a heavy chair. He was stripped to the waist of his Levis, and his sinewy, scarred little body was striped and crisscrossed with swelling blue welts. Blood oozed freely from an open cut on his shining bald head and spread in a crimson smear through the sweat that coursed down his weather-beaten face and neck. His eyes were glassy and dazed, but his bruised mouth still held its stubborn lines.

Behind him crouched a fat man with a stubby toothbrush mustache, gazing in startled terror at Big. The arm across his face availed him nothing when Big's fist shot home. The sharp report that followed might have been the snapping of a vertebra, or the impact of the man's head on the wall.

Then the giant was worrying at the twisted baling wire that held his partner helpless and scolding at Willie like a worried hen. When his great fingers made slow progress he set his foot against the chair and tore it apart.

He swung Willie Joe up on his shoulder like a sack of feed, and throwing caution to the winds, took the porch steps at one space-cover-

ing leap. As he ran through the flaring brightness where the ranch buildings etched themselves against the light he heard the roar and crackle of the flames.

A sudden outburst of shouting reached him, and he labored to increase his speed. Flying bullets whined and slapped the earth all about him as he reached the first shadows of the quakers. Barbed wire squealed and sang and tore his flesh when he plunged blindly into it. But at last he reached the sheltering darkness.

Holding as best he could to a stumbling run, Big swung to the right, hunting for the trail to the old Sam Blake cabin. His feet found it at last, more by luck than skill, and he breathed a bit easier at the soft sucking of the wet humus about his boots. Yet though the danger of pursuit seemed slight he dared not pause. The limp weight on his shoulder indicated that Willie was unconscious, perhaps—his blood ran chilly at the thought—perhaps already dead.

They were almost within hearing of Squaw Creek when Willie began to wriggle violently, and the little fellow's stammering treble, preceded by a burst of profanity, was raised in pained protest.

"Damn it, Big, yuh . . . yuh ain't no single footer, feller. Cain't yuh . . . gawsh! Cain't yuh set me down or somethin'?"

"Shet up!" roared Big, though the sound of Willie's voice was music in his ears; and Willie Joe thereafter confined himself to occasional grunts and whistles of discomfort.

Ten minutes later Willie Joe had changed mounts and the little pinto was eating up the river trail at a steady lope, with Rusty, the raw-boned black, pounding along behind him. Four miles they covered be-

fore the trail widened and Willie Joe drew rein. He looked back at the distant glow of red on the evening sky as Big came up.

For the first time in several hours Big George chuckled happily, deep in his throat. "Willie, yuh sure make a sight even in the dark. No hat, an' durn near naked an' needin' a bath somethin' scandalous. How come, feller?"

"Huh," grunted Willie. "Too damn curious, that's me. I hear folks comin' down the trail an' steps into the brush for a look-see. Three dudes comin'. Gits almost up t' me an' two of 'em swings on th' other an' empties guns into him. Then there's a big flash, an' next thing I knows I'm sittin' in the trail, an' three guys is watchin' me an' arguin' will they bump me off right there,

or take me to their boss. Reckon they had a lookout that sneaked up on me and hit me on the head."

Big clucked sympathetically.

"Then they take me to the boss, this Meyer," Willie continued. "He works me over personal. Says I'm a spy from some bunch he knows, an' has a right good time tryin' to make me own up to it. I sure warn't a bit unhappy when yuh socked him, Big. Well, I reckon we better go tell the sheriff, so's he kin clean up what yuh started. Bill sure was right fer once, huh?"

The giant started. The black horse stopped suddenly, and Big's voice, laden with annoyance, boomed out on the night:

"Doggone you, Willie," he grumbled, "you made me clean forget them trout I caught this afternoon!"

THE END



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by Phil Sharpe

SINCE last week's department was written, a barrage of information on new guns has turned up. This time the Savage Arms Corporation leads the news with one of the most outstanding announcements in the entire firearms field for the past several years.

Last year Savage announced their Model 220 shotgun in 12, 16, and 20 gauge. This is a very remarkable, low-priced, single-barreled shotgun selling for slightly more than \$10.00. Like all other low-priced shotguns, this was available only in a full-choke barrel. For average close-range shooting at birds and other small game the full choke is inclined to mutilate the game so that it is not fit to eat.

Now comes their Model 220-P shotgun. This is a new all-purpose arm with a Poly Choke built integral with the barrel. It comes equipped with a metal bead front sight, and a recoil pad is standard equipment, available in 12 gauge with a 30-inch barrel, 16 and 20 gauge with 28-inch barrel.

The Poly Choke has been on the market now for a number of years and is being widely used on expensive shotguns. Originally the device cost \$20 and you had to ship your gun to the Poly Choke factory to

have it installed and pay the round-trip shipping and installation charges. The price was reduced several times due to lowered manufacturing costs as this valuable gadget grew in popularity. Today it costs around \$15 installed.

This new Model 220-P shotgun is the first low-priced shotgun to be factory-equipped with the Poly Choke, and the price is astounding. The complete gun sells for \$15.65.

This new firearm is essentially the same as the Model 220 with the addition of the Poly Choke. It has a hammerless action with automatic top tang safety. All working parts are made of long wearing, special alloy steel and operated by strong coil springs. There is an automatic ejector which enables the user to remove fired shells quickly even with gloves or mittens on. The frame and barrel are polished and blued. Weight of this gun is about 6 pounds.

Another Savage development of the latter part of 1938 was the famous Utility Gun. This was a combination shotgun and rifle; their Model 220 shotgun plus a detachable rifle barrel and forearm. Rifle barrel was obtainable in either .25/20 or .30/30 calibers.

Later Savage announced that this

rifle was available in a .32/20 cartridge for small-game hunting and in the spring of 1939 it was announced that they were now making this in the .22 Hornet.

For woodchuck shooting the .22 Hornet is one of the finest and most accurate cartridges ever developed for ranges up to about 200 yards. The ammunition is inexpensive, but so far it has been necessary to have tremendously expensive rifles to handle it. With the addition of this caliber to the Utility or combination rifle the boys have really got something on the ball. The combination of rifle and shotgun sells at only \$17.25 and the rifle alone at \$13.25.

Target shooters in the revolver division have discovered that in match shooting it is necessary to qualify revolver matches into two definite groups—.22 rimfire and "any revolver." This has shown that the average good target shot can make a much higher score with a .22 than with any centerfire revolver. Centerfire calibers have long been standardized on the .38 Special for the finest of match shooting.

Some three or four years ago my good friend, Gus Peret, noted world traveler and big-game hunter, had two special Colt Officer's Model revolvers made up to handle the .32 Smith & Wesson long revolver cartridge—another cartridge which has been neglected for more than thirty years. He found he could shoot this much better and very kindly loaned one of his revolvers to the writer

and the other to Charlie Askins, Jr.

According to latest reports, Gus has acquired quite a few gray hairs trying to get those two guns back from us chaps. They were the most accurate shooting centerfire revolvers we had ever seen, and we found we could shoot .22 rimfire scores with them.

Some years previous to this the Peters Cartridge Company brought out a Wadcutter target load in the .32 Smith & Wesson long. The Wadcutter, in case you do not recall using it, merely means a bullet which cuts a clean, round hole without ragged edges full bullet diameter, even on thin paper. This little cartridge never became popular because no adequate guns were available in man-size to handle it.

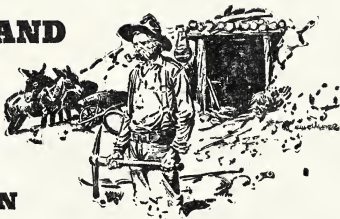
After we wrote of those experimental guns that Gus made up, the demand started to pile in on Colt and Smith & Wesson and they turned out some excellent target revolvers with adjustable sights and in man-size weight to handle this particular caliber. The cartridge which had practically stagnated was revived and went over big, with both Peters and Remington manufacturing it.

Now we have received an announcement from the Western Cartridge Company announcing that they have just added the .32 Smith & Wesson long Wadcutter cartridge to their line. During the last three years, this particular caliber has established new records and it looks like the .38 Special is going to be hard hit in the near future.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Be sure you inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.

MINES AND MINING

by
**J. A.
THOMPSON**



THE old-time prospector was proud of his profession and had every right to be. His was a distinct business. He made the first finds of the country's great mineral deposits and, in the last analysis, it was the prospectors' discoveries upon which the huge and tremendously important mining industry of today has been built, an industry second only to agriculture in importance as a natural resource.

Ben Smith brings up an interesting subject in his letter from Cleveland, Ohio, when he says: "I wish you would take time out to explain how the term 'prospector' came into being, also when and just what it means. What is the difference between a 'prospector' and a 'miner,' if there is a difference? I would be interested in getting the low-down, and I think other Western Story Magazine readers would, too."

Ben, the prospector, as he is known today, was an American product originally. He was one of the early specialists, and he confined his business strictly to the finding of new mineral deposits capable of development and profitable exploitation. But he left the development and exploitation to others, to men who were miners, which the prospector was not.

Apparently, prospecting as a distinct craft originated, not in the West, but in Illinois around about 1845 in the vicinity of Galena. Workable lead deposits were discovered there at that time and it seems that a group of pioneer settlers got the idea of deliberately hunting around in the neighborhood for more outcrops and showings which they could sell to the lead miners and lead-mining interests. A writer of the day referred to this new type of enterprise as "prospecting," and to those who engaged in it as "prospectors."

The terms caught on. They were accurate and descriptive. The prospector was a searcher, a hunter for mineral deposits rather than a miner who worked them during their development and the subsequent actual extraction of ore. Nowadays the terms "prospector" and "miner" are not quite so distinct, many miners being prospectors partially or wholly when jobs are hard to find and many prospectors, working their own properties or carrying on their own small to moderate scale mining operations.

In fact, in small-scale placer gold mining or in the early bonanza gold rushes in the West when a man could make twenty to fifty dollars a

day, and sometimes a hundred with a gold pan, or sluice box, or rocker, the gold hunter or prospector obviously did his own mining. But those men were primarily stampers, and were called prospectors because that was the name given the crowds of yellow-metal searchers who trekked to California in '49 and the years immediately following. Prospector was a new word then. It quickly caught on. It is recognized in dictionaries today and accepted as part of the English language.

The real prospectors, however, were men who learned to know not only gold indications, but also ores and signs of other valuable metals as well—silver, copper, lead, and zinc. A whole list of other important metals, such as mercury, tungsten, molybdenum, et cetera, has now been added to the list.

These first prospectors realizing the opportunities afforded by the liberal United States mining laws, which considered (and still does) a man's mineral find his without payment of tithe or taxes to the government for its discovery, soon gave up the mining end of the game altogether. Like the prospectors back in Illinois who started the peculiar trade going, they began concentrating their attention on the finding of new mineral deposits.

As the West opened up and the vast—and what seemed to be almost limitless mineral wealth of that section of the country—came to be

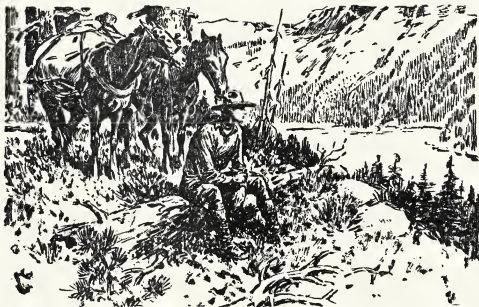
more fully appreciated, the prospector, as a discoverer of these new deposits and as an originator of mining booms, gradually assumed a status that lifted him above the position of the actual miner. It was he who found the places and showed the empire builders of the western mining industry where to build. Small wonder that many of the early prospectors took a definite personal pride in the distinction between prospecting and mining.

This professional feeling among the early prospectors, who not only knew ores and ore indications, but were performer men of undisputed pioneering ability as well, was carried on for years. As a matter of fact it still exists among quite a number of old-time prospectors. It is an honest pride in a clean, fascinating outdoor calling, a pride that has been handed down today to the modern metal hunters intrepid enough to follow in the brave footsteps of the pioneers.

To K. L., Clinton, Iowa: Prospectors still do find nuggets in California. Big ones on occasion. Not so long ago Manuel Coster and Bill Wulf were pocket-hunting in Lager Beer Ravine near Rescue, El Dorado County. Coster dropped a spadeful of gravel into his gold pan and started washing it. Halfway through the operation, he picked out a heavy, glistening yellow rock. The nugget was a forty-ouncer, worth better than twelve hundred dollars.

We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.



WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

by **JOHN NORTH**

If you want to know where to get free road maps with any particular route you want to take already traced on them, together with travel information relative to sights of interest, just send your name and address to John North, in care of Western Story, inclosing a stamped, self-addressed envelope, and he will tell you where to write for them.

ONE of our readers in East Texas, who is planning a visit to the San Francisco Fair, asks us to suggest a leisurely and interesting trip for him. His request is so much like those of a lot of other people that I am publishing my suggestions in the hope that other vacationists will act on them if they are interested in such a trip.

For J. G., then, I suggest that he try to cover the following territory:

Drive down to San Antonio, Texas, and visit the missions and the Alamo, where the Texas revolu-

tion was waged. Then go on to Laredo on the border, to El Paso, and across to Juarez in Old Mexico, for some local color and a good idea of the Big Bend country.

Continue on through the southern part of New Mexico into southern Arizona, taking time out to visit the Coronado National Forest south of Tucson. Then proceed northward into northwestern Colorado. Go through Grand Junction, where you will hit Route 50 and head into Utah.

In Utah veer southward by way

of Moab to the La Sal National Forest and the Arches National Monument. Continue down into Arizona from there, going into the Navaho Indian country to Lee's Crossing. Then double back north to the Zion and Bryce Canyon National Parks.

From there, head down to Boulder Dam. Stop long enough to take the water trip on the big lake and go up into the lower end of the Grand Canyon which, until the lake made it accessible by water, was never seen except by a few explorers.

Then cross back into Arizona again and go farther up for other views of the Grand Canyon. After that head southward to Phoenix.

Hit the Gila River and continue to Yuma, then into California by way of Death Valley. There was a time when touring Death Valley by car was something to be dreaded, but not any more. The roads are fine, and you can always find adequate accommodations.

Going into the southern part of California, I should run through the Imperial Valley and see some of the fine fruit orchards which stretch mile after mile in country so flat that it resembles a table.

By following the coast you will have a chance to visit the picturesque old Spanish missions and all the colorful coast towns. This route will eventually bring you to San Francisco, where you will find the bridge to Treasure Island and the Fair.

After you have had your visit,

hop in your car and head up into the mountains north of San Francisco. In the high Sierras you will find snow, and you will get a good look at the famous Sequoias.

The next important point on your road map is Crater Lake. Leaving here you enter Oregon and continue on to Washington, taking time out to visit the big government dam projects on the Columbia River.

Crossing the border into British Columbia, you next go over to Vancouver Island and up into the Canadian Rockies, where you will find many resorts and practically any outdoor sport. And when you are in this vicinity, remember to include a trip to Banff in your itinerary.

Coming back eastward, it might be a good idea to cross the mountains and take one of the good roads across the southern stretch of Canada, since you can make just as good time, and at the same time see the province while doing it.

If you come east as far as Michigan or Wisconsin before crossing into the States, by all means visit the lumbering camps and the iron mines that dot this part of the country.

Then, when you are tired and ready to call it a day, you can head for the Mississippi River and follow it downstream to where you turn off for east Texas. If you have an opportunity to make this great-circle trip; you will have seen a representative cross-section of the North American continent.

We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

THE HOLLOW TREE

Conducted by HELEN RIVERS



TO all those disgruntled members of the Old Holla who have written me complaining because they haven't had any answers to their letters, we want to draw attention to the one printed below. This Pen Pal had a letter printed three years ago and received almost five hundred responses! That's quite a lot of mail, and if she could do it, so can all of you. But remember that if you want somebody to be interested enough to write to you, you've got to make your letter interesting enough to warrant an answer. Think back now, all of you, and see if you put your best foot forward when you wrote to those pals who didn't answer you. If you didn't, answer Viola's letter and try to make an impression on her so that she'll want to get to know you better.

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have been sitting here at home looking over some recent Western Story Magazines and thought I'd write to the Hollow Tree once again. You see back in 1936 you printed a letter for

me and I received over four hundred and fifty answers from boys and girls all over the world. In my letter I asked for songs, and was well supplied. Now, I am coming with another plea. I'm collecting mills and am trying to get a one and a five mill from every State in the Union that uses them. In some States they are known as a luxury tax, some as tax tokens and in others as mills. Whatever they are called in your State, won't you please try to help me? I am married now but some of you will probably remember writing to me before I was married. My name was Viola Cooke and I was living in Iowa, Louisiana. I am twenty years old, play the piano, and have learned to play the guitar since I last wrote. Now come on everyone and respond just twice as well as you did the first time I had a letter published. I will try to answer all letters but will first reply to those that include a snapshot. Here's hoping I hear from you all.—Mrs. Oscar Moore, Rt. No. 8, Box 275, San Antonio, Texas

This Australian will write interesting letters—

Dear Miss Rivers:

As all my interests are tied up in land here, I do not expect ever to be able to visit America, but I greatly enjoy reading about it and would like better still to know the viewpoint of its people. If anyone would care to write to me about their trade or industry, and general news of their country, I would be very pleased to reciprocate. After all, one can view the scenery of a country in pictures, but only through personal contact or through letters can one find out just what people think and feel. And since Western Story Magazine is read the world over, I do not limit the correspondence to America, but welcome it from anywhere and will answer all in turn.—John M. O'Callaghan, Box 50, Mossman, Queensland, Australia

Virginia has a surprise for somebody—

Dear Miss Rivers:

My folks own a ranch in Colorado and I am an honest-to-goodness cowgirl although I have been living in California for almost three years. I am sixteen years old and have traveled in fourteen States. I collect cowboy songs and poems of all kinds. I enjoy the movies, and my favorite actor is Gene Autry. I would like to hear from anyone and will answer all letters. The writer of the first letter I get will receive a surprise.—Virginia Walker, Rt. No. 8, Box 372, Fresno, California

Write to Kathleen in far-off South Africa—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a South African and would be very pleased if you would get me some Pen Pals. I am seventeen years old and would like both boys and girls to write to me from everywhere. My hobbies are collecting snaps, letter writing and photography. Hiking, horseback riding and tennis are my favorite outdoor sports, and I also like to dance and sing. I promise to answer all!

letters and exchange photos. Please don't disappoint me as I am rather lonesome.—Kathleen Moutat, 170 Long Street, Cape Town, South Africa

Bombard Herbert with cheery letters—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am just another lonely soldier, twenty-two years old, who would like to see his letter published in the Hollow Tree. I have been in the army almost three years and before that lived in Fonke, Arkansas. I enjoy all outdoor sports, my favorites being football and baseball. I promise to answer all letters, especially from those who inclose snapshots.—Herbert Elam, Army & Navy Hospital, Hot Springs, Arkansas

Arthur is sure 'nough Western-minded—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am seventeen years old and am looking for some cowboy Pen Pals about my age. I am interested in horseback riding, fishing, shooting, and like to work around farms. I also like cowboy movies and cowboy songs. I would especially like to hear from cowboys living in Colorado, Texas, Nevada or New Mexico, but those from any other States are welcome, too.—Arthur Goodwin, R. F. D. Beechwood Street, Cobasset, Massachusetts

Here's a friend for those over forty—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a lonely widow living in North Carolina and would like to hear from folks who like to write letters and make new friends. I am forty years old and would like Pen Pals between forty-five and fifty, so come on and sling some ink my way.—Mrs. Eliza Stilwell, Rt. No. 2, Box 130, Huntersville, North Carolina

Mamie wants to hear from gals in foreign countries—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have always wanted to hear from someone living in a foreign country. I am sixteen years old and a junior in high school. My hobby is collecting stamps and pictures of my favorite movie stars. I will answer all letters and will exchange snapshots, so here's hoping I hear from some girl living in a foreign country.—Mamie Ray, Box 92, Arcata, Humboldt County, California

He is interested in cultural pursuits—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I read your Hollow Tree department often and enjoy it very much. I hope you can find me some Pen Pals of any age. I am a young man thirty-five years old and am interested in literature, poetry, art, music and tennis. I think I can write interesting letters and will reply to everyone who writes.—W. Albert Hickox, 420 E. Superior Avenue, Jacksonville, Illinois

Stanley will exchange souvenirs—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am eighteen years old and would like to hear from boys and girls from all over the globe. I am interested in photography and mak-

ing model airplanes. I will exchange souvenirs with all who are interested, so come on, everybody, and drop me a line.—Stanley Smith, Company 1936 CCC, Camp Trimmer, Sanger, California

From Nova Scotia comes this plea—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty-four years old and would like to hear from boys and girls from all over the world, particularly western Canada. I work in a bakery and am fond of outdoor sports, especially skating, tennis and swimming. I promise to answer all letters and will also exchange snapshots. Here's hoping I get loads of letters.—Vera McGrath, Burzeas Bakery, Fairview P. O., Halifax, Nova Scotia

They'll tell you all about the isles of the Pacific—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Would you please enter this plea from two very lonely military policemen who are stationed in the Hawaiian Islands and would like to correspond with all persons from sixteen to thirty. We are both twenty-one and interested in football, boxing, surfboard riding and all other sports played here in the Hawaiian Islands. We promise to write interesting letters to those who write us and will exchange snapshots with all who send us theirs, so come on, girls and boys, and drop us a line.—Pfc. Marvin Lofton and Pvt. Richard Rymus, Military Police Company, Schofield Barracks, T. H.

Christina is a sports enthusiast—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am fourteen years old, in my second form in high school and I would like to hear from Pen Pals who collect stamps, as that is my hobby. My favorite sports are badminton, swimming, basketball and volley ball. I'll be waiting to hear from you Pen Pals, so come on and write to me.—Christina McLaren, 321 Winona Drive, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Garrie wants to hear from Southerners—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a middle-aged man, single, and I would like to hear from Pen Pals who live in the South. I will exchange snapshots with anyone, any age. My hobbies are amateur photography and radio, and my favorite sport is hiking. I promise to answer all letters, so come on and fill my mailbox.—Garrie Fronheller, R. R. No. 3, Box 146, Hamburg, Pennsylvania

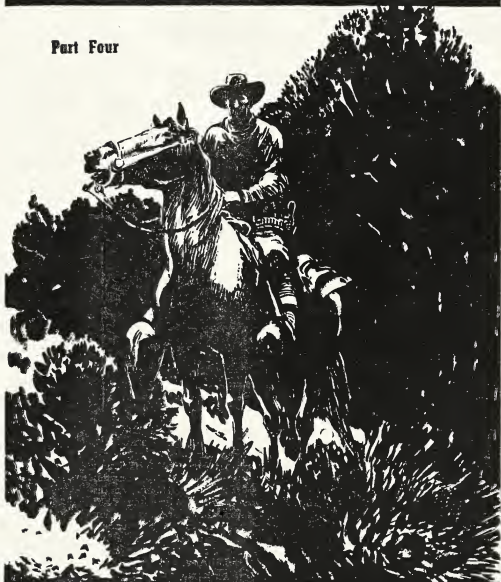
This young matron loves to write letters—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I love to write letters and would very much like to have Pen Pals from all over the world. I am twenty-six years old, married and have a five-year-old boy. Please find some friends for me to exchange souvenirs and snapshots with. I can tell them some very interesting things about this part of the country.—Mrs. Gerald Snyder, R. D. No. 2, Hammondsport, New York

RENEGADE ROUNDUP

Part Four



By WILLIAM COLT MacDONALD

RENEGADE ROUNDUP

BY WILLIAM COLT MacDONALD

The Story So Far:

THE presence of Deputy United States Marshal Nick Vulcan in Vista Wells, a little town on the United States-Mexico border, seems a rather unwarranted intrusion to the townspeople and to Sheriff John Laramie. There had been some trouble in the Centaur country, but that was purely a local problem, having to do with the rustling of cattle belonging to Gage Hammond, an important rancher.

Larry Crockett, a young rancher, and Gage Hammond have been bitter enemies for some time. Crockett believes Hammond plundered his ranch during a several weeks' absence, and Hammond likewise accuses Crockett of rustling cattle from him. Since he cannot prove his charges against Hammond and is unable to get Sheriff Laramie to press them, Larry has been trying to even the score himself.

Learning that Hammond expects a gold shipment on the Capitol City stage, Larry, wearing a disguise and a mask, holds it up and takes the money from Steve Riker, one of Hammond's men. His plans are worked out carefully to give him an alibi, but when he later meets Joan Bristol, Sheriff Laramie's niece who had been on the stage, she notices a scratch on his hand and recognizes him as the bandit.

Larry is forced to admit that he held up the stage, but when he explains his motive to Joan she agrees not to expose him. However, Steve Riker is also suspicious. He goes to the Crockett ranchhouse breaks in and finds the clothes worn by Larry when he held up the stage.

Steve Riker informs Vulcan of his find and the lawman confronts Crockett with the sack containing the "evidence." When it is opened however it is found to contain a suit of prison clothes.

Unknown to Riker Scar-beak Malone, an escaped convict, had been watching him when he brought the clothes to the Circle H bunkhouse. Malone, whose prison clothes handicapped him in his flight, had snatched the opportunity to take the plaid shirt and Oregon breeches worn by Crockett during the raid.

Riker, infuriated because Crockett has again escaped detection, pulls a gun on him.

CHAPTER XV

THE MAN IN THE OREGON BREECHES

LARRY whirled away from the restaurant doorway just as a leaden slug splintered the jamb. His right hand flashed to hip and came up spitting fire. Riker unleashed another shot, then swayed as Larry's fire took effect.

Flaming lead again spurted from Larry's gun. Riker gave an agonized groan, staggered a step, then pitched face down in the roadway.

Larry came striding back, his gun ready in case there were another attack. Shouts were raised along the street as men poured from the Warbonnet and other buildings. A crowd gathered.

"He's killed Steve," yelled Spanish Grant, whipping out his own gun. Nick Vulcan, who was close on Grant's heels, swore and caught his arm just in time to avert the man's murderous intentions.

"None of that, Grant!" Vulcan snapped. "Put that gun away."

Meanwhile, Larry had spied Grant in the crowd. "Let him loose, Nick," he called. "I'm ready."

"You put that gun away," Vulcan ordered. "There's been enough shooting already."

Larry nodded. He shoved fresh loads in his six-shooter, then dropped it back in its holster.

Grant and Hammond were clamoring loudly for Larry's arrest. Sher-

iff Laramie came plunging through the crowd.

"Put him under arrest, John," Hammond bellowed angrily. "He never give poor Steve a chance."

"Hold it a minute, John," Vulcan snapped. "There's three men here that saw the whole business." He pointed to three pedestrians who had been passing at the time. "They tell me that Riker fired first and missed his shot. Then Larry opened up on him."

Other men on the street at the time substantiated the story. Hammond and Grant quieted and began to back away.

Nick Vulcan's sarcastic voice brought them to a halt. "Hammond, you were going to force Larry to prove, or retract, certain words," he said. "Remember? That's what you sent Riker after him for. I remember it distinctly. I believe you said '*Get Crockett*.' Have you forgotten?"

Hammond looked away. "We'll go into that some other time, Vulcan. Right now I got to see about getting poor Steve to the undertaker. C'mon, Spanish, take hold of his feet."

The three men watched Hammond and Grant carrying Riker's body away. The gruesome procession was followed by a straggling knot of men.

"Am I to be placed under arrest?" asked Larry.

"Hell, no," Vulcan growled. "It was self-defense."

Sheriff Laramie hesitated, then shook his head. "I reckon it was," he echoed with a weary sigh.

GAGE HAMMOND and Spanish Grant were in an ugly mood by the time they reached the Circle H. They rode into the ranch yard, unsaddled their

ponies at the corral and turned them inside. Lippy Vaughn came out from the bunkhouse to meet them.

"Where's Steve?" Lippy inquired. "Steve's dead," growled Grant. Hammond said nothing.

"Dead?" Lippy repeated stupidly. "That's what we said," Hammond snapped.

"But . . . but I don't understand—" Lippy began.

The three walked into the bunkhouse, Grant telling the story while Hammond maintained his morose silence.

"But what become of those Oregon breeches and that plaid shirt?" Lippy asked in bewilderment.

Grant cursed. "You know as much as we do. It's a mystery."

"Damn that Crockett!" Lippy rasped. "We ought to—"

"Yeah, I know what we ought to do," Hammond broke in impatiently. "So far we haven't had the breaks, but we'll get Crockett yet."

"I'd had him today if that damn Vulcan hadn't stopped me," Spanish growled.

"Poor Steve," said Lippy. "That's tough. Funeral day after tomorrow, eh?"

"Dammit, do I have to tell you everything twice?" Hammond said irritably. "Where're the boys?"

"Haven't come in yet. It's nigh three hours to supper yet," Lippy reminded him.

"Oh, I'd forgotten." Hammond heaved an angry sigh. "And just when we had Crockett dead to rights, too. By hell, I'd like to know who switched those togs—" He paused, and a troubled look darkened his face. "I wonder if—" Again he stopped.

"You wonder what?" Spanish asked.

"Never mind." Hammond shook his head and dropped into a chair.

"Spanish tells me he sent Buchanan on to the hide-out," he said, changing the subject.

Lippy nodded. "I didn't even see the hombre. We were in bed when he arrived. Spanish went out and took care of him."

"Buchanan messed things up, too," Hammond growled. "It seems like nothing goes right. I should have had a slug put into him. He was pretty damn cocky. He knew I had to protect him or he'd probably spilled all he knew."

"That's a chance we have to take, boss," Spanish pointed out, shrugging his muscular shoulders. He sat on a corner of the table, idly swinging one leg. "It's too damn bad Crockett had to see you heading for the jail last night."

"That don't bother me so much," Hammond said with a frown. "It's my word against Crockett's, and I reckon Vulcan would believe one of us as fast as he would the other." He changed the subject again. "By the way, Spanish, with Steve gone, it'll be up to you to take over his job across the border."

Spanish nodded. "I expected that. I ain't too keen about making those rides and losing my sleep, but I'll handle it until we get squared around—"

"Or until we're stopped altogether," Lippy put in. "We've had some bad luck lately, and if that hombre isn't stopped—"

"You know," Hammond interrupted, "since we tied Crockett to that holdup, I'm more sure than ever he's the hombre that's bucking us across the border."

Grant's face clouded. "By hell! I wish that was something we could turn over to Vulcan to run down that—"

"Don't you get no crazy ideas," Hammond snapped.

"I know better than that, boss."

"When the boys hear about Steve they'll be hard to hold down," Lippy Vaughn declared.

"You hold 'em down, you hear me?" Hammond said angrily. "I don't want them raiding the Bridle Bit. That would stir up too much trouble. You tell the boys we'll take care of Crockett ourselves."

Grant still sat on the corner of the table, facing a window at the back of the bunkhouse. Suddenly he muttered an oath, dropped to the floor and moved swiftly to the door and outside.

"What the hell!" Vaughn exclaimed.

HAMMOND started to speak, then stopped as sounds of a struggle were heard at the back of the building. Vaughn and Hammond started outside, and were met at the corner of the building by Grant, who was escorting a narrow-shouldered, gray-haired man who had a scarred, broken nose. The man looked frightened. Grant had a firm grasp on his shoulder.

"Saw this hombre peeking in the window," Grant explained. "For an old coot, he puts up an awful scrap."

"Gage! Gage Hammond!" the captive cried. "Don't you know me?"

"I'm damned if I do," Hammond growled, looking curiously at the man. "Bring him inside, Spanish."

He and Lippy re-entered the bunkhouse. Grant gave the scarred-nose man a shove that sent him sprawling through the doorway, then followed his captive inside.

The man scrambled to his feet, cowering. "Gage," he pleaded, "you ain't forgot your old pal, have you?"

"Holy cow!" Vaughn yelled. "Look at his clothes."

"Oregon breeches!" exclaimed Hammond.

"Plaid shirt!" from Grant.

"Where'd you get those clothes, hombre?" Hammond asked in a dangerous tone.

The old man's eyes grew pleading. He disregarded Hammond's query and whined, "My Gawd, Gage! Don't you remember me? Is this a way to treat an old pal? After what we've been through together? I stuck by you all these years—"

Hammond had been studying the man's face, his memory coursing back through the years. That scarred nose! Change that gray hair to brown! Give this cowering, miserable creature a swaggering, roistering attitude, and—it couldn't be. But it was! Hammond's jaw dropped.

"Scar-beak Malone!" he ejaculated.

Malone's lips parted to expose missing and broken teeth. "Sure, sure, pal," he said eagerly. He shuffled forward, one hand extended. "Ain't you glad to see me?"

Hammond glanced coldly at the extended hand, but made no attempt to take it. "Why should I be?" he asked coldly.

Malone stopped short, a hurt expression creeping into his eyes. "Is that a way to treat an old pal, Gage?" he protested weakly. "I had a tough time finding you. I thought you'd be glad to see me, after the way you wrote. And I've kept mum all these years. I stuck by my pals in—"

"Chop it," Hammond interrupted harshly. "How'd you get here? When did they let you out?"

A sly grin parted Malone's lips. "They didn't let me out. I just decided I'd been there long enough when I got yore note, tellin' about how you had a job for me—"

"You damn fool!" Hammond snarled. "You'll have a whole pack of lawmen down here, lookin' for you."

"But I don't understand—" Malone mumbled.

"Who is he?" Spanish asked.

"We pulled a job together one time," Hammond said shortly, "and this clumsy fool got caught. Got a long sentence up north—"

"And you," Grant said shrewdly, "have been stringing him along all these years so he wouldn't squeal on you, eh? Gage, I figure this old coot deserves better treatment at your hands. He stuck to you, and helped—"

"You keep out of this, Spanish," Hammond said angrily. "I know what I'm doing. This man's dynamite to our plans."

"Mebbe so," Grant nodded. Despite himself, he felt his sympathy going out to the unfortunate Malone. "But now he's here, I figure you should do what you can for him."

"Dammit, Spanish, this is my business," Hammond snapped. He swung back to Malone. "How'd you get away?"

MALONE had dropped to a chair. Now he spoke eagerly, anxious to be praised for his cleverness. He couldn't get it through his head that he wasn't welcome at the Circle H. Grant felt sorry for the old fellow as Malone described the harrowing experiences of the past weeks.

"And now," Malone finished at last, "I'll be much obliged, Gage, if you'll give me my share of that money. If I ain't welcome here, I'll be—"

"What money?" Hammond interrupted.

Malone looked at him in surprise.

"Why, my share from that bank job. You said you were saving it for me."

"You fool," Hammond said brutally, "that money is gone long ago. Why in hell didn't you stay where you were? You were better off in the pen. I just wrote you those letters to make you contented. I didn't think you had a chance to get out."

"You double-crossed me," Malone accused, rising and leveling one unsteady forefinger at Hammond. "That's a hell of a way to treat a pal—"

"Aw, close your trap," Hammond snarled. Stepping forward, he raised his fist as though to hit the old man. Malone cowered and dropped back into his chair. "Where did you get those clothes?" Hammond went on, glowering.

Malone told his story. How he had seen Riker arrive with the sack of clothing and how, when he saw his opportunity, he had lifted the sack from the bunkhouse, substituted his prison raiment and returned the sack to its place. "—and I been hiding out in the brush ever since, Gage, waiting for you to show up," he concluded. "Never thought I'd get a welcome of this sort—"

"Shut your dirty trap," Hammond said furiously. "Taking those clothes that way messed up all our plans. You damned, interfering old fool with your prison stink. Why didn't you stay where you were? You're not wanted here. We've got no place for broken-down penitentiary bums—"

"That's enough, Hammond!" Some spark of manhood still remained in the man, giving him a certain dignity as he rose to his feet. "I know when I'm not wanted. All right, I'll get out."

"You fool!" Hammond roared furiously. "Don't you see I can't

let you go. You'll be caught eventually—"

"If I am," Malone said quietly, "I figure I'm still enough of a man not to peach on a former pal—even a pal who has turned out to be a rat—"

"Damn you, shut your mouth!" Hammond rasped.

"—dirty, low-down, sidewindin' rat," Malone continued defiantly. "All I ask is the borrow of a gun. I'll pay for that when it's earned me some money. And I'll get out. Just give me a gun. I won't ask any more favors from a lousy, two-bit, stinking, double-crossin'—"

"Dammit, I'll give you a gun!" Hammond howled, losing all control. He hurled himself forward, drawing his six-shooter. "I'll blast you clean to hell!"

Spanish Grant moved fast, leaping in and seizing Hammond's gun arm in a muscular grip. "Lay off, Gage," Spanish snapped. "Keep your head. This old coot deserves better than that. You pull trigger and you'll answer to me."

Hammond whirled on Grant. His eyes burned with murderous lights.

"You'll answer to me," Grant warned again. "Hell! I wouldn't treat a dog the way you've treated Malone—"

"Better keep out of it, Spanish," Lippy Vaughn advised.

"I know what I'm doing," Grant said, eyes intent on Hammond.

Hammond's eyes fell before the angry lights in Grant's gaze, and after a moment the Circle H boss looked away. "There's no use you and me fighting, Spanish," he growled. "We got too much at stake."

Still clutching his gun, he let his arm fall to his side. Then his eyes fell on Scar-beak again, and a sudden rush of temper got the better

of him. Furiously cursing Malone, he raised his gun, and before Grant could prevent the action, brought the barrel of the weapon smashing against the side of the convict's head. Malone groaned and toppled sidewise to the floor.

GRANT looked at his chief disgustedly. "I'll bet you're proud of this Gage," he said, kneeling at Malone's side.

Hammond looked a bit ashamed of himself by this time. "Is he dead?" he asked.

Grant shook his head. "The old cuss has a hard head. He's just knocked out. Probably be all right in a couple of hours. I'd like to see him get some sort of square deal, when he comes to."

"What in hell can we do with him?" Hammond asked irritably. "He's too old to work. Damned if I'm going in for charity at this late date."

"I'm figuring there's a debt you owe him," Grant said steadily, "whether he can work or not. Hell, Gage, there should be something he can do. Maybe wash dishes for cookie."

"You got as much head on you as a rock," Hammond said scornfully. "There's bound to be a search for him down in this country. Do you want him found here? Don't forget, Nick Vulcan said he's going to get in touch with the penitentiary and learn who had those clothes—"

"Look, Gage," Vaughn broke in eagerly. "you can produce that plaid shirt and those striped trousers now. We'll hang the deadwood on Crockett yet."

"Yeah?" Hammond sneered. "And to make our story stick, we'd have to produce Malone. And once the law dogs git hold of Malone,

they'd guess who his companion was on that old job of mine. No, thanks. We can't take a chance."

"What we could do," Grant proposed, "is take those togs and leave 'em some place around Crockett's house. Then get Vulcan to make a search of the house."

"That might work," Hammond said thoughtfully, his eyes gleaming. "We'll consider it later. Meanwhile"—he glanced angrily at the unconscious form sprawled on the floor—"what we going to do with Malone?"

"We can send him to the hide-out," Grant proposed. "The cook over there can use a helper to chop wood and do little chores. Hell, the poor old coot deserves a chance. I was in prison once. I know what Malone's been through."

"All right, all right," Hammond said grudgingly. "We'll send him to the hide-out tomorrow, Spanish, seein' you're so softhearted. You'll be attending Sunday school, first thing you know." His voice rose suddenly. "But get the damned buzzard out of my sight now. Every time I think how he's messed things up, I feel like pluggin' him."

Between them, Lippy Vaughn and Spanish Grant carried Malone out to the barn and stretched him on a pile of hay. The convict was breathing evenly when they put him down.

"He'll sleep it off in a couple of hours," Spanish said. "Then we'll talk to him."

"Aces to tens he'll be too sick to talk when he wakes up," Lippy declared. "He probably won't feel like movin' around for a couple of days."

But Vaughn was wrong. Two hours later, when Hammond happened to wonder about Malone, they



A rope snapped over Grant's shoulders and a mocking voice said, "Drop your gun, señor."

discovered the barn was empty. Malone had taken his departure, unnoticed. Hammond flew into a rage and ordered his men to mount and scour the country. But the search was futile. Late that night when the last rider came straggling in from a combing of the brush, he, too, reported failure. And that gave Gage Hammond something new to worry about.

CHAPTER XVI

SPANISH RIDES SOUTH

FOR a week all was quiet in Vista Wells. Gage Hammond and his men, when they came to town, had little to say. And, for the time being at least, Nick Vulcan appeared to have lost his suspicions regarding Larry. But Larry refused to be fooled. He knew Vulcan was alert, every minute, for clues regarding the identity of the man who had held up the stage.

Larry had joshed Wishbone Herick unmercifully for the carelessness with which he had disposed of the clothing used in the holdup. Wishbone had been intensely contrite about the whole affair. Luckily, he had been more cautious in choosing a hiding place for the gold Larry had secured in the holdup.

Scarcely a day passed that Larry didn't ride to the Rafter B. He told himself it was to see that Joan Bristol was getting along all right, but despite himself he found he was getting more and more interested in the girl.

Hoddy Jefferson and Joe Dinsmore had been put to work painting, whitewashing, building up corals, and repairing the equipment that needed such attention. Joan was anxious to get her herd started, but Larry persuaded her to wait a trifle longer.

"Things aren't settled as much as they might be yet," he told the girl one afternoon when he was leaving the house. "You wait a spell before buying your herd. I'd hate to see you put your money in cows and then have the whole herd run off some night."

"But, Larry," Joan protested, "I'll have Hoddy and Joe to watch out for things for me. And when I get my herd I expect to hire other men to—"

"Sure, I understand," Larry nodded. "But you wouldn't want any men killed off protecting your herds, would you?"

"You think that might happen?" Joan asked, paling a trifle.

"I think it might," Larry said flatly. He rose from his seat on the long front gallery of the house. "You take your time about buying cows. I got a hunch things will be coming to a head before long, and we can clean the country of crooks. Well, I've got to be riding along."

"Can't you stay to supper?" Joan asked.

"Thanks, no, I've got some business in town," Larry said regretfully.

"Sure it isn't a girl?" Joan teased.

Larry grinned and shook his head. "I've sort of come to the conclusion," he said slowly, "that from now on there isn't any other girl for me."

"Why, Larry—what do you mean?" Joan asked, wide-eyed. "What do you mean—*other* girl?"

They were facing each other. Larry took Joan's two hands in his and looked into her gray eyes. "If you can't figure it out," he said a bit unsteadily, "I'll give you some explanations, and perhaps a demonstration, when things get settled in this neck of the range."

He left the girl gasping on the

porch and strode out to his waiting pony. "Why . . . why, Larry," she finally found her voice to call after him, "I never realized—oh, Larry, I think I'll be waiting for that demonstration, but don't make me wait too long."

And that brought him back to the porch again. The next minute she was in his arms. They were blissfully unconscious of passing time until they heard Teresa's giggle from behind them. Larry and Joan parted, their faces crimsoning.

"It's all right, Teresa," Joan called uncertainly, "you can come out now." But another giggle was her only reply as the Mexican girl retreated swiftly into the house.

"Darn considerate girl," Larry grinned.

"Larry, what is this business that takes you away now? Won't you stay to supper?"

"No can do." Larry shook his head. "It's important, honey."

"And dangerous?" Joan asked quickly.

"I don't figure so," he answered reassuringly.

"You won't tell me what it is?"

"I will if you insist," Larry nodded. "But I'd rather not, just yet."

Joan didn't press the subject. "Just promise me you'll be careful," she said. "I've discovered you mean considerable to me, Larry."

And that called for further demonstrations. It was a half hour later before Larry rode away from the Rafter B, headed for his own place.

WHEN Larry arrived at the Bridle Bit, Wishbone Herick had food on the table. "Yo're late," Wishbone grumbled. "I expected you an hour ago. Don't see what kept you so long. Say,

you ain't getting smitten on Joan Bristol, are you?"

"What makes you think that?" Larry asked innocently, wolfing a slab of bread and washing it down with coffee.

"Oh, it sort of struck me," Wishbone said slowly. "Well, I don't think you could do no better."

"Right," Larry agreed, rising from the table. "You'll be best man at the wedding, Wishbone."

"Don't tell me you've set the day already?"

"Nope, we haven't even mentioned that part, but we've sure reached an understanding, cow-hand. We sure have."

"That's good news," Wishbone said enthusiastically.

"That thought's not original with you." Larry buckled on an extra belt and gun, whistling a happy tune. He started for the door again. Wishbone followed him out to the corral and stood near while he saddled up.

"Dammit," Wishbone grumbled, "I always hate to see you making these trips. Well, adios, and good luck."

"Adios, pard," Larry said, swinging up to the saddle. "I'll see you some more."

"That's something I wonder every time I see you leave here," Wishbone muttered as he gazed after Larry's form streaking along the trail. He heaved a long, uneasy sigh and turned back toward the bunkhouse.

At about the same moment, Spanish Grant was riding the trail that led toward Vista Wells. Instead of riding into town, however, and stopping first at the Warbonnet, as was his custom, he swung wide around the town and emerged on the back street paralleling the Mexican border.

Five minutes later he had passed the customs officers of both governments and was riding through Cisterna Vista, a collection of adobe huts, saloons, gambling houses, and stores of various kinds, all set down in helter-skelter fashion. On the winding, dusty main thoroughfare, he stopped before a small office which bore over its doorway a faded, sun-warped sign bearing the words,

PUTNAM RANDLE COMPANY
MINING PROPERTIES

Putnam Randle was a heavily-built man with a furtive manner and shifty eyes. He was seated at a dusty desk within his office when Grant entered. There were no papers about, nor any other evidence to prove that he did the thriving business he claimed, in his handling of mine properties.

On the other hand, during his occasional visits across the border to Vista Wells, he spoke loudly of his connections with the higher-ups of the Mexican government, and urged the citizens of Vista Wells to invest in his properties.

Grant stayed less than five minutes in Putnam Randle's office, then came out to his horse again and, mounting, rode south along a twisting trail with high brush on either side, in the direction of Caserio, a Mexican settlement fifteen miles away. The sun was just setting when Grant left Cisterna Vista. Before he had gone two miles it was pitch dark.

A LITTLE over an hour later he pulled his pony to a halt before a blocky adobe structure in Caserio, dismounted and, after knocking at the heavy plank

door, received the summons to enter.

Caserio wasn't much of a town. It had one *cantina*, half a dozen shops, and a number of squalid houses from which flickering yellow lights shone. A guitar was heard from the *cantina* and there was much loud laughing in the place.

Again Spanish Grant spent little time over whatever business he was on. The door of the house he had entered opened suddenly, and Grant stepped out, saying, "So long, Bosschere." A voice answered from within. Grant closed the door and walked swiftly to his horse. Mounting, he turned the animal around and headed back at a brisk gait in the direction of the border.

As he rode, Grant drew his six-shooter. He peered ahead through the darkness, every sense alert, ready to shoot at the first sign or sound of trouble. He covered half a dozen miles in such fashion.

"I figure I'm reaching the spot where Revas and Riker and the other boys were stuck up," he muttered to himself. "Well, I'll show the cuss, if he tries it on me, just what a hunk of lead feels like ripping through his guts."

He rode on, feeling supremely confident that he would succeed where the others had failed. Up ahead, beyond a big live oak whose limbs spread above the roadway in the faint starlight, he remembered there was a huge boulder, right at the edge of the road. That was probably the spot a bandit would choose to do his sticking-up. Well, they'd find Spanish Grant prepared for that kind of trick.

Grant rode on, tightening the grip on his six-shooter as he peered ahead through the gloom. He was passing under the big live oak now, his eyes straining through the darkness in

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the direction of the boulder.

And then it happened! Something dropped quickly about Grant's shoulders from the leafy boughs above. He felt a lariat tighten about his body. With a curse he jerked his pony to a halt to avoid being dragged from the saddle. The holdup man had outguessed him. He'd been waiting in the tree, lariat ready, until Grant came along.

TO Grant's ears came soft laughter, then a voice said in Spanish, "Be not alarmed, señor. I have no desire to harm you—unless, of course, you become stubborn. I want only that which you carry."

"Damn you," Grant cursed. He knew better than to struggle against the rope which bound his arms so tightly to his sides. He still held his six-shooter, but was powerless to use it.

"Speak Spanish, please," the voice said. "I do not speak the English so well."

Grant tried to argue his captor into releasing him. The Spanish he employed was very bad. The bandit laughed softly.

"Maybe is better eef I spik the American," he said amusedly. "Those noises you sputter out, they are—what you say?—unpleasant to the ear."

Something familiar about that voice, Grant thought. Could it be Crockett's? No, that was impossible. This was a Mexican, damn his greasy hide!

"You weel drop theese gun what you clutch in the hand. Queeck! I would not weesh to shot you"

Grant hesitated, but realized it was useless to disobey. With a curse he dropped the gun to the earth. The rope about his body relaxed a trifle, but not enough for him to make a move to turn the

tables on his captor. He heard a soft step in the dust and realized the bandit had dropped from the tree.

"Now you may alight from the *caballo*," the bandit said, and switched again to broken English. "Move very of the careful. I have of the nervous an' I do not hol' my gun so steady. So, eet is bes' you do nozzing to make me startle. You understan', no?"

"I understand, greaser," Grant said angrily, climbing awkwardly down from his saddle. "What you want of me?"

"That, I mus' first make the search to determine."

Grant felt a gun barrel jab against his spine. He stiffened, wondering if he could turn suddenly and grapple with this damn Mexican.

The bandit seemed to read his thoughts. "Eet is bes' you do not try eet, señor," he advised. "At the leas' move, theese gon in your back would make the explode. Ver' sad, no?"

"All right, greaser," Grant growled, relaxing. "I know I'm in a tight. Now, what you want?"

"Don' worry, I find heem."

Grant felt the man's form close to his own. He also felt the gun boring into his spine. He stood silent while the bandit's free hand ripped open his shirt and felt for the packet Grant had concealed there. Grant cursed, but there was no help for the situation. He knew he was helpless. This damn Mexican knew just where to look.

The bandit stepped back. "That ees all, señor. *Gracias!* One leetle minute and I'm release the rope what hold you. No fonny moves, please. Theese gon of mine is of the—how you say heem?—the hair trigger. An accident would be very moch to the regret."

GRANT stood fuming while the bandit moved away. A moment later he felt the rope loosen about his shoulders. The next instant the lariat was flipped off, over his head.

"You are free to make the depart, señor," the bandit continued. "Mount on your so-fine horse and give of the spurring. Adios, señor."

"Now, wait," Grant protested. "My gun!"

"It is to be regret, your gon you have drop' een the road. Ver' sad, no? And ees too dark to find heem."

"Now, wait a minute, Mex. It ain't too dark."

"I'm *know* is too dark," the bandit contradicted, a hint of threat creeping into his tones. "On your way, like I'm tell you. Evairy minute the finger gets more of nervous on theese trigger. Queeck! I have so little of the patient."

Grant climbed back in his saddle. "By hell, Mex, if I ever meet you again, I'll—" he began angrily.

A shot from the bandit's gun roared beneath Grant's pony. Startled, the horse reared and Grant nearly lost his seat. He clutched at the horn, involuntarily driving spurs into his horse's sides. The pony dropped to all four legs and darted off like the wind. Grant had to brace himself to stay in the saddle. By the time he had slowed the horse down, it was too late to turn back, even if he had been so inclined.

Cursing futilely, he proceeded on toward the border, racking his brain with speculation. Who was this Mexican bandit who periodically held up the Circle H men? For a time Grant and Hammond had suspected Larry Crockett. But, now that Grant had talked to the bandit for the first time, he was inclined to doubt that theory. Surely the

bandit's broken English had not been assumed. It couldn't be Crockett. And yet, Grant wondered. Crockett was smart, too damn smart, sometimes. Grumbling, cursing, raging, he rode on toward Cisterna Vista, with another failure to report.

CHAPTER XVII

POISON SNOW

AS the sounds of Grant's galloping horse died away down the road, the pseudo Mexican bandit, emerged from the brush, coiling his rope and leading his horse. He was laughing softly to himself. The change of technique in holding up Grant had worked fine. Grant had looked like he was all tensed and ready for a stick-up over by that boulder yonderly. He had got the surprise of his life when the lariat dropped out of the tree above him.

Before mounting, the bandit walked out to the center of the roadway where the starlight shone more clearly on the oiled silk packet he had taken from Grant's shirt. It was but a moment's work to open the packet. Inside was a small velvet bag; this the bandit slipped into a hip pocket without opening, after a preliminary feel of its contents. Next he gave his attention to the some fifty-odd small white paper envelopes which had also been in the oiled-silk container.

Opening one of the envelopes, he saw that it contained a small quantity of fine white powder. He swore with sudden rage. "Dope! Damn poison snow! Any man that would try to smuggle this stuff into the United States is a yellow, dirty coyote. I'd like to get my hands on Gage Hammond right now."

Impulsively he sprinkled the tiny

white crystals on the earth, crushed the envelope and threw it away. The other envelopes were rapidly opened and their contents similarly dumped on the ground where they could bring no harm to anyone.

With envelopes and poisonous powders disposed of to his satisfaction, the bandit mounted again and turned his horse toward Caserio.

Half an hour later he pulled to a stop before the very house Spanish Grant had entered not more than two hours before. The town was quieter now, though from one building came the strains of a guitar and a soft tenor voice raised in an old Spanish song. The holdup man climbed down from the saddle and knocked at the door of the house before which he'd stopped.

From within came a high-pitched query, "Who is it?"

"Me—Crockett."

"Come in."

Larry pushed open the door, stepped inside, and closed it. "Howdy, Anatole," he greeted.

ANATOLE BOSSCHERE was a huge, gross individual with tiny pig eyes in a fat face that bulged over his soiled collar. His hair was a tangled, oily black that hung down about his brows. His hands were pudgy, his fingernails black. He stank of cheap perfume. There were egg stains on the fancy vest beneath his rusty-black broadcloth suit. From his name, one might have judged him of French extraction. He wasn't French; perhaps his name wasn't even Bosschere. No one knew a great deal about him.

There was considerable plush-and-gilt furniture about the room into which Larry stepped. Bosschere himself was seated behind a wide table and was in the act of slipping

a gun into a drawer when Larry entered. Lighted candles stood about in holders.

"Ah, it is Mr. Crockett," Bosschere said with an oily smile. His voice was thin and squeaky and held a trace of some foreign accent. "I could not be sure," he went on, gesturing toward the drawer into which he had just slipped his gun, "so I was ready with my revolver. You were successful?"

Larry smiled coldly and dropped into a chair across from the table. "Ever know me to fail, Anatole, when you send me word in time?"

"You are very reliable," Bosschere conceded. "There was no trouble?"

Larry shook his head. "There never has been. But if Hammond and his men ever discover how you double-cross 'em, there'll be trouble for you, Anatole."

Bosschere shrugged fat shoulders. "How should they discover? Only you and I know. I will not tell. You will not tell, lest it cut off your profits. The messenger I send to you does not know what is in the note. It is all very satisfactory. But tonight I was not sure. That man, Grant, has never before come here. Of course, he had the proper recommendation from Mr. Putnam Randle, so I knew I was safe. At the same time, this Grant appeared more dangerous, more intelligent than the others who have worked for Hammond. But you were successful. That is all that matters. Let us get to business."

Larry drew from his pocket the small velvet bag he had taken from Grant and passed it across the table. Bosschere opened the drawstring of the bag and emptied its contents on a sheet of paper before him. A number of small objects, wrapped in tissue, rolled out on the

table. Bosschere began to unwrap them, wheezing asthmatically while he worked. There was silence in the room except for the occasional faint rustle of tissue paper. Candles flickered and wavered, throwing long shadows across the floor.

FINALLY Bosschere was finished and eighteen diamonds of various sizes lay on the desk, sparkling and scintillating under the light of the candles.

"Nice bunch of stones," Larry commented, "especially that big one." He indicated a perfect blue-white stone of some four or five carats' weight.

Bosschere frowned. "I do not know," he said dubiously, "these do not appear to be the stones I sold Mr. Grant. These are very poor—very poor indeed. The flaws I can see with my naked eye. What are you trying to pass off on me, Mr. Crockett?"

Larry laughed scornfully. "Don't try that again, Bosschere. You know damn well those are the same stones. I don't bluff easily."

"But, Mr. Crockett—"

"You'd try to cheat your own mother, Bosschere," Larry interrupted impatiently.

"And why not?" Bosschere asked blandly.

"Look, Bosschere," Larry said curtly. "I do business with you because it's convenient, but that's no sign I like you or trust you. Now, let's get to terms and cut out all this stalling. You've been paid once for those stones and—"

"It is not so," Bosschere protested. "I let Mr. Grant have them on credit."

"Liar!" Larry accused. "You wouldn't let anything go on credit. I know you. You got your money. Now I'm giving you the chance to

buy them back and make another profit. Do you want them, or don't you? If you don't, I'll take them some place else."

Bosschere was more aghast at this last suggestion than he had been at Larry's contemptuous manner. "You couldn't," he squeaked earnestly. "Where could you sell them?"

"I'll show you." Larry rose to his feet abruptly and reached across the table to the diamonds.

A sudden squeal of dismay left Bosschere's thick lips as he quickly covered the diamonds with one dirty paw. "We talk business, we talk business," he said hastily.

Larry dropped back into his seat. Bosschere lifted his hand from the diamonds again. "Talk business, then," Larry said. "And there were eighteen diamonds there, not seventeen, Bosschere. Put it back!"

Bosschere grinned in oily surrender, nowise dismayed at being caught in the attempted theft. He replaced the diamond he had palmed when he lifted his hand. "Ah, you are too smart for me, Mr. Crockett."

"I doubt it," Larry said shortly. "No matter what I get from you, I've got a hunch it's less than what the stuff is worth. All right, what's your offer?"

Bosschere commenced to complain about hard times and lack of ready cash. Larry cut him short and insisted on a flat price. Reluctantly, Bosschere offered Larry four thousand dollars for the lot.

Larry laughed contemptuously. "I'll take eight."

"Eight thousand dollars! You are insane, Mr. Crockett—"

"Sure I am," Larry agreed, "but not insane enough to take your price."

"You'll bankrupt me. Think of my poor old mother in Greece."

"Why should I? Aces to tens you never do."

"Think of the profits you have already made. Twice within a month you have sold me diamonds that Hammond bought—"

"And think how much Hammond gets through that I never hear about. And there were five months I never once had a chance to make a haul."

"Is it my fault I cannot always let you know in time?"

"That's not the argument. Eight thousand dollars."

"I'll ruin myself," Bosschere wailed. "Five thousand, I offer."

THEY wrangled for fifteen minutes and finally settled on six thousand dollars. From his table drawer, Bosschere drew out some gold money and a wad of United States paper money. The price was counted out and shoved grudgingly across to Larry.

"That stone there," Bosschere pointed out the largest diamond, "should have come through before. But there was a stage holdup. Money which Hammond expected was stolen. Otherwise, we could perhaps have sold it twice to him and you could have made two profits. And me, also. I lose money when such crooked robbers roam the country."

"How much money did you really lose by not selling that stone before," Larry asked abruptly.

"Five hundred dollars, as God is my judge."

"Liar," Larry said shortly. "I figure it's nearer three hundred. Well, I hate to see even you lose any profits through me." He placed three thousand dollars in bills on the table.

Bosschere's little pig eyes opened

wider. "Mr. Crockett! You were that robber?"

"I didn't say so," Larry said shortly. Already he regretted revealing as much as he had. "And don't let me hear of you telling anybody it was I who robbed that coach, Bosschere, or I'll blast a lead explosion through your fat carcass."

This was sheer bluff and Bosschere knew it. However, he nodded and greedily drew toward him the money Larry had placed on the table. He chuckled with satisfaction. "It's a good thing Hammond doesn't know diamonds, or he'd realize that he buys the same stones over and over sometimes."

"I reckon." Larry gained his feet. "I'll be getting along."

Bosschere looked up in some surprise. "But wait—where is the other?"

"There isn't any other," Larry replied.

"You mean—" Bosschere paused and looked extremely shocked.

Larry nodded. "I emptied all the cute little envelopes and threw the dope in the dust. I'll do it every time, Bosschere, that I catch one of Hammond's men carrying that poison. I told you that before."

Bosschere groaned. "Mr. Crockett! That is wasteful. I would have paid you good money for those envelopes. You are losing me profits."

"Bosh! You were paid once by Grant. You haven't lost a cent."

"But we could have had two profits, perhaps even more."

"Not on that stuff," Larry said grimly.

"You have no heart, my friend. Think of the poor devils who have to have their snow."

"I'm thinking of the skunks who

keep 'em using the stuff. Maybe if dope addicts are forced to do without it, they'll get cured," Larry said sternly. "No, I don't like it, Bosschere. If you had any decency, you'd refuse to handle the stuff."

Bosschere smiled ingratiatingly. "That is where you and I differ, Mr. Crockett."

"That's only one of the ways," Larry said contemptuously. He finished stuffing money into a money belt and into his pocket, and started toward the door. "Well, adios, Bosschere."

Bosschere heaved a fat sigh. "Do you have to leave so soon? I have a bottle of good whiskey. We could drink together."

Larry shook his head. "That's another point we differ on." He paused, one hand on the doorknob. "I don't expect you to understand that, either."

"What way do you return home?" Bosschere asked idly.

Larry grinned mockingly. "Never fail to ask that, do you, Bisschere? I'll answer like always—it's none of your damn business. If I told you, you'd probably send someone to hijack me before I reached the border. Good night."

And before Bosschere had time to reply, Larry had slammed the door behind him and climbed into the saddle. Heading the pony north, he was soon submerged in the darkness of the night.

CHAPTER XVIII

SLASHING HOOF

THE following night, Larry and Wishbone Herrick had finished supper and washed the dishes before sitting down in the bunkhouse for a cigarette. Gray

Continued on page 115



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AT ALL NEWSSTANDS**

Continued from page 113

smoke mingled with blue, swirling and spiraling about their heads. The night was a trifle cool, and Wishbone had built up a fire in the pot-bellied iron stove. Larry was glancing through a recent newspaper.

Wishbone sighed with solid contentment and stretched his feet toward the heat from the stove. He gazed meditatively at the flame burning evenly in the chimney of the kerosene lamp on the table between them. "This here's what I call comfort," he said. "Food in my belly, my feet warm and no worries."

Larry glanced up from his paper, smiling. "What do you mean, worries?"

"Like last night. You should know how it is, son. I'm on pins and needles until you get back from such jobs. Now, if you and Joan was all hitched and we were running cows like in the old days, everything would be hunky-dory, but this sticking up the Hammond crew, every so often, that's tough on my old nerves."

"You're getting old, grandpa," Larry laughed.

"Sure, I am, but not so old I couldn't go along and give you a hand on such jobs. Then I wouldn't worry so much—"

"We've made good profits, Wishbone."

"Good profits don't mend tattered nerves. When I think it was Spanish Grant you held up last night, it most gives me the willies. Grant is dangerous, Larry. He's not a push-over like Revas and Riker and those other boys you had to handle."

Larry grinned. "He didn't look any tougher to me."

"Just the same," Wishbone growled, "I wish you didn't have to take such risks. Bosschere is a rat, a fat, oily rat. I don't trust him."

"Nor I."

"He'd double-cross you any time if he saw any profit in it. Right now you're useful to him, as he is to you, but if he could make anything by crossing you up, he'd do it in a minute."

"I realize that as well as you do, Wishbone. As a matter of fact, I'm just about ready to quit doing business with him."

"Come to yore senses, have you?" Wishbone said in a pleased tone. "Well, there's nobody more pleased to hear that than I am—though likely it would tickle Hammond, too, if he knew."

Larry chuckled. "Maybe I should let him know he's safe from now on. But it's not thought of the risk that makes me ready to stop, Wishbone. I've never concerned myself in that direction. Never did seem risky to me, as a matter of fact. But when I started interfering with his smuggling plans, I had just one object in view."

"I know," Wishbone nodded. "You wanted to square the account for the cattle he'd stolen from the Bridle Bit."

"Correct. I've been doing some figuring lately, and the way I look at it the account's just about squared. So far as the loss of my stock is concerned, I'm even with Hammond and his crew, and we're not out any money. It was the only way left to me when Sheriff John refused to act. Of course, I don't figure the account's squared for the men Hammond and his crew killed. I'm not through with Hammond yet, not by a long shot. Another thing, I hate like the devil to see Hammond running dope through,

into this country. Somehow, some way, I'm going to put a stop to that game before long."

"You know how that can be handled right *pronto*, don't you?" Wishbone said meaningly.

Larry nodded. "You mean, stop the man who's bringing it through the customs?"

"Exactly."

Larry shook his head. "I'm not ready to do that yet. Maybe there's some other way. I hate to think of—"

HIS words were broken off by the wild, excited sounds of frantically milling horses that came from the direction of the corral. There was a sudden, quick pounding of hoofs, wild snortings, turmoil. They could hear an angry, vicious whinnying.

"There's the pinto!" Wishbone exclaimed. "He's spooky as hell. If a lobo has got in, the pinto might stomp him to death. He's nervous as hell and mean—"

"Might be a puma cat," Larry interrupted. He was already across the room, lifting a Winchester from its wall brackets. Wishbone jerked a six-shooter from a gun belt hung on a peg.

It was a bright moonlit night, and as Larry passed through the bunkhouse doorway he could see the horses moving uneasily about in the corral. He broke into a swift run.

"It's that pinto!" Wishbone yelled. "I can see him rearin' up and down, slashing at somethin' with his hoofs. Mebbe it is a puma."

A shrill, terrified scream sounded clear above the other noises. "That's no puma!" Larry cried. "It's human!"

By the time they arrived at the corral the other horses had quieted and were huddled together at the

far side of the corral. In the foreground, the black-and-white pinto horse was striking savagely with its sharp hoofs at some dark object that writhed in the dust below the plunging, rearing horse. A moaning sound reached Larry's ears.

Larry swore, dropped his Winchester. Seizing a braided leather quirt that hung from the top rail of the corral, he flung open the inclosure gate and stepped inside with Wishbone close at his heels.

"Get back, Pinto—back!" Larry ordered, closing in on the horse.

Dust swirled through the corral. A man groaned on the earth. The pinto horse paused at Larry's voice and came down to all fours, trembling. Its tail was up, its nostrils flaring, eyes wide. Larry slashed it across the nose with his quirt and the horse backed away. Wishbone leaped in, his fingers closing on the pinto's nostrils, and backed it across the corral. With the arrival of the two men, all the other horses quieted down.

The man on the earth was making a feeble struggle to arise. Larry caught his arm to help him up. "Wanted . . . horse," the man mumbled thickly. "Tired . . . walkin' all . . . time. Damn horse . . . went . . . went proddy . . . reared at me—"

The man suddenly went limp and slumped down. Blood was flowing from his mouth and nose. His shirt was ripped and covered with dirt. His pants were torn. A wave of pity swept through Larry as he stooped and gathered the thin form into his arms. "Come on, Wishbone," he called over his shoulder. "I've got him."

Wishbone left the horses, which were thoroughly quiet now and followed. He closed the gate and picked up Larry's Winchester.

Larry started for the bunkhouse, the unconscious man cradled in his arms.

Wishbone caught up with him. "Want any help?"

Larry shook his head. "I can make out alone. He don't weigh anything."

"Know who he is?"

"Stranger to me. Old cuss. He's passed out. I hope he ain't hurt bad."

"I hope not," Wishbone said, "but it's his own fault if he is. That pinto is tough on hoss thieves. Member that feller that tried to steal him in Vista Wells last summer. Pinto thrun him, then started in to tromp—"

Larry nodded. "I figure that's what happened here. This poor cuss didn't even have a saddle or reins. I don't know what he figured to do. Probably got on Pinto's back and then got tossed. He must have been desperate to take a chance of that kind."

THEY reached the bunkhouse and placed the unconscious man in a bunk. Larry was getting a basin of water when Wishbone suddenly called. "Holy cow! Look at the clothes he's wearing. Those Oregon breeches and plaid shirt. Larry! What's the answer?"

Larry looked as amazed as Wishbone. He shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe it connects this hombre with the Hammond crew. Maybe he's an escaped convict and exchanged his prison duds for these. I can't figure it out, and I'm not going to try now. I want to see how badly he's hurt."

Wishbone ran expert, examining fingers over the stranger and looked at Larry soberly. "I don't figure he has much chance, pard. Feels like his chest is crushed. There's ribs

busted. His head and shoulders are cut up something terrific from that bronc's hoofs. I hope his lungs ain't been punctured by those broken ribs."

The unconscious man was breathing with difficulty; blood trickled from his mouth from time to time.

"There's a bruise on the side of his head, too, but that wa'n't done recent," Wishbone continued. "Looks like somebody might have slammed him with a gun barrel. I wonder who he is. Poor old coot."

Larry wiped a smear of blood from the gray hair. "We've got to get him in to the doctor," he said decisively.

Wishbone shook his head. "I don't think we should move him. The jarring of a wagon might raise hell in his present condition. The more he's moved, the worse it will be. You can't tell how much damage those busted ribs may be doing to his lungs and chest."

Larry nodded and reached for his gun belt. He buckled it on, then donned his sombrero. "I'll go in for Doc Stark. If he's home we should be back within three or four hours. I'll push hard. Meanwhile, you get this poor hombre undressed and do what you can for him. And, Wishbone"—Larry smiled slightly—"you'd better get rid of those Oregon breeches, and—"

"I get you," Wishbone nodded. "It's about time I put some more fuel in that stove. See you later, pard."

Larry nodded, secured his saddle and headed toward the corral. Wishbone turned back to his patient.

IT was well after midnight when Larry returned with Dr. Stark, a typical frontier physician, who had given the best years of his life in treating everything

from gunshot wounds to epidemics. He was a tall, spare man in his sixties, and thoroughly capable. He nodded to Wishbone, set down his small black case and went at once to the unconscious form in the bunk.

Wishbone and Larry stood back, watching. "He didn't come to at all?" Larry said.

Wishbone shook his head. "Been just like that since you left. His breathing don't sound so good. Doc must have been in when you got there, eh?"

Larry nodded. "I was lucky to catch him. He saddled up to once and we sure fanned the wind on the way back."

"You didn't report this to Sheriff John?"

Larry shook his head. "No use reporting it to the sheriff," he declared. "If this hombre dies, it wouldn't do any good. If he lives, well, why add more work to the sheriff? Maybe we can get the old feller on his feet, question him a mite, and send him off with a new start."

Larry dropped wearily into the nearest chair, then rose again and went to put his horse in the corral and water the doctor's horse. By the time he returned, Dr. Stark had concluded his examination and stood talking to Wishbone.

"How about him, doc?" Larry asked.

Stark shook his head. "He hasn't a chance in the world, Larry. That horse of yours mangled him plenty. He's bruised all over and hurt internally, too. There's a concussion and his right lung is finished. He's clinging to life by a thread."

Larry shook his head sympathetically. "That's tough. But what can we do? Would it help if we loaded him into a wagon and took

him over the mountains? There's a hospital at Gunlock City."

Again Stark shook his head. "In the first place he wouldn't live long enough. In the second place, moving him would only hasten death. He couldn't stand such a trip. He's likely to pass out at any time."

"Isn't there *anything* we can do for him?" Wishbone asked.

"Nothing much I know of. I don't expect him to regain consciousness. If he does, I'm leaving some tablets you can dissolve in water and give him. They'll help deaden the pain. Otherwise, just keep him as comfortable as possible. That's all anyone can do."

"No soup or anything?" Wishbone asked.

"No food of any kind. It's useless to try to feed him. Pour a little water between his lips from time to time. It'll make his passing easier." The doctor smiled a trifle. "Danged if I know anybody to take as much trouble over a horse thief as you, Larry."

"He looks to me like he hadn't had many good breaks in his life," Larry said. "It's my guess he's suffered plenty in the past."

Larry paid the doctor his fee and accompanied him outside to say good-night. He watched while the doctor's horse was visible in the moonlight, then as the rapidly receding hoof-sounds died away, he turned back into the bunkhouse, closing the door behind him.

"You made a hard ride," Wishbone said. "Tumble in, I'll set up with this hombre, tonight."

Larry nodded and drew off his boots. "Wake me up, in a few hours, and I'll spell you."

"I wonder who he is," Wishbone pondered.

"Me, too," Larry yawned. He was still wondering, when sleep overtook him.

CHAPTER XIX

DEATH FOR A DOUBLE-CROSSER

THAT same night Gage Hammond and Spanish Grant had left Vista Wells, shortly after supper, passed through the U. S. and Mexican customs officers at the Border and into the town of Cisterna Vista. There they halted a short time at the Mining Properties office of Putnam Randle and held a serious discussion with Randle.

When they left the office, their features were set in deep angry lines. Again they mounted their horses and headed southward toward the town of Caserio.

They didn't push along at more than an ordinary gait for there was a problem to discuss. Hammond's face was furrowed with a heavy frown. The horses loped easily along the trail. Red streaks still showed in the sky to the west, but in a short time night would descend. In the east a few stars had appeared.

Hammond suddenly slowed pace a trifle, as the road curved around a gigantic clump of prickly pear. "I tell you," he burst out, "it can't be anybody else but Bosschere!"

Grant checked his pony to accommodate the speed of Hammond's horse. He nodded. "It's beginning to look that way to me, too," he agreed.

"We're losing money on this sort of set-up," Hammond stated angrily. "It's got to stop. I'm getting sick and tired of sending men to Bosschere to buy his stuff, only to have my men stuck up and the stuff taken away from them. Who in the devil do you suppose the holdup man is?"

"Well, you know," Grant reminded, "we always did sort of sus-

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picion Crockett. How, though, I don't know."

"That fellow last night," Hammond queried, "you're sure it wasn't Crockett?"

"No, I'm not absolutely sure," Grant said irritably. "You keep asking that same thing. I've told you all I know. It was smart enough to be Crockett's work; at the same time, the hombre's voice sure sounded like a genuine Mex."

"Dammit, Spanish," Hammond growled, "I thought I could depend on you, but you lost the stuff the same way Revas and Steve Riker did—"

"And that's something else you keep harping on," Grant snapped. "I didn't lose the stuff the same way. They was held up at the point of a gun. I had a rope dropped over my shoulders before I could make a move to prevent it. Hell! I didn't have a chance to shoot. I was helpless, and that stick-up man had his gun against my back. You'd have been as helpless as me in the same fix—and don't try to tell me you wouldn't. I'm as smart as you, any day in the week."

NOW don't get sore, Spanish," Hammond said soothingly. "I'm not questioning your ability, a-tall. It's just that I want to get to the bottom of this thing. That's why I questioned Randle as close as I did. I don't suspect him for a minute; I know him too well. He was as sore as me. It's cut into his profits too. No, Randle's safe. The leak isn't there."

"All right. If you're sure of Randle, I'll take your word for it. That eliminates one source of information."

"And leaves three," Hammond nodded. "You and me and Boss-

chere. You and me, well, we both know we didn't say anything. That pins the leak to Bosschere."

"But I can't see why Bosschere should cross us up. You pay him what he asks for stones and happy dust. What more can he demand?"

"Two profits instead of one," Hammond said grimly.

"That sounds plumb hoggish."

"Bosschere is plumb hoggish. You haven't known the man as long as I have, Spanish."

"Maybe you're right," Grant conceded.

"I'm right sure I am, this time. It looks to me like Bosschere sells us the stuff, then tips off somebody to take it away from us before we can get to Cisterna Vista."

"Then what happens to the stuff?"

"I don't know," Hammond said slowly. Then he was struck by a new thought. "Maybe the holdup man disposes of it himself, and maybe—I just thought of this, Spanish—maybe he sells it back to Bosschere."

An explosive oath left Grant's lips. "And Bosschere," he said hotly, "sells it back to us again. Dammit, Gage, do you think we've had the wool pulled over our eyes that way?"

"I'm beginning to think so," Hammond said bitterly.

Grant jabbed wicked spurs into his horse's sides. "Come on, let's move," he rasped. "I'm plumb anxious to talk to Mr. Anatole Bosschere. If he can't prove he's been on the square with us, it's going to go awful tough with the buzzard!"

Hammond nodded and spoke to his horse. Once more the two animals lifted their gaits. Before long the lights of Cisterna Vista were left far to the rear.

It was after nine o'clock when Hammond and Grant reached Ca-

serio. Lights shone from adobe huts here and there. The usual revelry and noise was heard from the town's single *cantina*. A few Mexicans were to be seen, but for the most part the winding dusty streets were deserted.

Grant and Hammond pulled their ponies to a halt before Bosschere's house. Hammond tried the door. It was locked, but he could hear voices within. He turned to Grant. "Bosschere ain't alone."

Grant shrugged his shoulders. "That don't bother me none. The way I feel right now, I'm ready to take on Bosschere and all his Mex friends."

Hammond nodded and knocked loudly on the door. There was a moment's silence, then Bosschere's voice: "Who is there?"

"It's me—Gage Hammond, Anatole."

More voices inside, then the door was opened by a pretty young Mexican girl, rather scantily clothed. She stood aside, as Hammond and Spanish Grant pushed in, then closed the door after them.

Bosschere sat at a table, cluttered with dishes. At one side stood two empty wine bottles. A third bottle, partly full, stood at his elbow. Tall candles flared and guttered on either end of the table.

BOSSCHERE greeted his visitors by waving a half of roast chicken, on which he'd been gnawing. The man's fat face was smeared with grease. He put down the chicken on his plate, saying genially, "Welcome, my friends. It is good to meet you, again, Mr. Grant. My little Dolores and I are having a supper party. You are just in time. Dolores, fetch chicken and *frijoles* and *tortillas* for my friends. Hurry! And don't forget

the wine. Draw up chairs, gentlemen, draw up chairs and—"

"Just a minute, Bosschere," Grant interrupted, "we haven't time for parties. We're here on business."

"Business?" Heavy dark brows raised above Bosschere's pig eyes. He shook his head regretfully. "I am sorry, gentlemen, I cannot accommodate you. I have at present, on hand, no stones or narcotics to sell you. Just as soon as more arrives, Mr. Hammond, I will send you word, as usual—"

"I'm not ready to buy more—yet," Hammond interrupted curtly. "I want to talk to you about what happened last night."

"Last night?" Bosschere's eyebrows lifted another degree. "I do not understand."

"That's why we're here," Grant said meaningly. "To make you understand. You'd better get rid of your girl, Bosschere. What we're going to say, might not be for her ears."

"You can trust Dolores," Bosschere assured him. "I trust her in everything. She is very faithful—"

"Get rid of her," Hammond snapped.

Bosschere shrugged fat shoulders and called, "Dolores!"

The girl appeared from an inner room. Bosschere spoke rapidly to her in Spanish, concluding, "Return in an hour, when our business is concluded."

Dolores nodded; cast a resentful glance at Hammond and Grant, and quickly threw a shawl about her shoulders. Grant closed the door after her and locked it. He came back to the center of the room. Bosschere looked from Grant to Hammond and his face paled a trifle as he studied the expressions on their faces.

"Bosschere," Hammond began in

an ugly tone, "Grant was high-jacked on the way to the Border last night with the stuff he paid you for. The stones and dust were taken from him—"

"Ah, that is very distressing Mr. Hammond." Bosschere spread his fat hands apologetically. "But what can I do? If your men are not reliable, is it my fault—"

"Yes, I think it is, you fat slug," Grant rasped. "I figure you tipped off a pal that I was traveling through with the stuff—"

"Mr. Grant!" Bosschere began indignantly.

"We'll do the talking, Bosschere," Hammond said coldly. "We figure you've double-crossed us, and last night wasn't the first time. I've lost a lot of money through you. Now, you're going to come across and tell us just who's working with you."

"This is ridiculous," Bosschere sputtered, fear growing in his eyes, as he watched Grant and Hammond draw their guns.

"Tie him in that chair, Spanish," Hammond snapped. "We'll show him a few tricks."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" Bosschere struggled to rise from his seat. Grant struck him a hard back-hand slap across the face. Bosschere fell back, pleading, in a terrified voice. Grant ran from the room to the kitchen, returning with a couple of towels. With these he bound Bosschere's arms to the chair, then shoved the chair back from the table. Finally he knelt and removed Bosschere's carpet slippers.

BOSSCHERE'S eyes were wide with terror now. He opened his mouth to scream for help, but Hammond anticipated the outcry and, stepping swiftly around the table, shoved his gun barrel in Boss-

chere's face. Bosschere's mouth partly closed and he remained silent. Perspiration beaded on his forehead. His fat carcass trembled and he rolled his eyes appealingly to Hammond.

"You ready to confess you double-crossed us, Bosschere?" Hammond demanded.

"This is all a mistake, Mr. Hammond, I assure you," Bosschere gasped. "I have nothing to confess. I have been honest with you—"

"Think fast," Grant snapped, "there's worse to come."

"But I have done nothing, Mr. Grant."

Hammond gave another order. A shrill outcry went up from Bosschere as he realized what was contemplated. Hammond slapped him into silence. Grant again knelt by Bosschere and jerked off the man's socks. Then he reached to the table for a candle.

"Go on," Hammond growled. "Let him have it!"

Grant set his lips and placed the flame of the candle beneath the soles of Bosschere's bare feet. Bosschere squirmed and wriggled and groaned in agony. Finally Grant removed the candle flame.

"Now, you ready to talk?" Hammond asked cruelly.

Bosschere swallowed hard, shook his head. "There is nothing to tell," he moaned.

"Give him some more heat," Hammond ordered shortly.

Again the candle flame was placed to Bosschere's naked soles. He tried to jerk his feet away, but Grant was skillful in keeping the blaze of the candle well concentrated on the bare flesh. Great tears ran down Bosschere's fat cheeks. He slobbered, begged and drooled, twisting his body from side to side. Finally he

broke down. "I'll talk, I'll talk," he half screamed.

With a sigh of relief, Grant set the candle back on the table. "I was beginning to think we'd never break this hombre down," he declared.

"Tell your story, Bosschere," Hammond said grimly, "and we want the truth, all of it. We'll know if you try to lie to us. It won't be any bother a-tall for Spanish to make good use of that candle again. And there's worse things than scorching your toes, we've got in mind. Maybe if we started on your eyes—"

"No, no, no!" Bosschere groaned frantically. "I will tell—everything. It was wrong, but I will pay you every cent. Oh, Mr. Hammond, I'll make everything right—"

"Talk, dammit!" Grant said, disgusted with the man's groveling. "Who you been tipping off when we buy stuff from you?"

"It was Crockett. He talked me into doing everything—"

"Crockett!" Hammond exclaimed. "We suspected him!"

"Damn Crockett!" Grant burst out. "I'll square with him."

BOSSCHERE nodded, eager now to make the score against himself look less black. He told how he had sent word so Larry could hold up Hammond's messengers and how Larry sold the stolen gems back to him. He gave dates, told just what stones were included in each bargain, and the amount of money he had given Larry. Once started, words poured from the man's lips, as he made a complete confession of his duplicity. "And . . . and something else," he half sobbed. "It was Crockett who held up the stage and stole your gold and—"

Fresh oaths burst from Hammond and Grant. "The more fool me," Hammond ended bitterly, "for ever



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telling you I was sending for gold to buy that big diamond. Where is that stone now?"

"I sold it to Mr. Grant last night," Bosschere quavered.

"And Crockett took it offn me and sold it back to you," Grant snarled.

"Along with all the other stones," Hammond raged, his face white with passion. "Damn you, Bosschere for a double-crossing, dirty hound. You—you—"

Overcome by an excess of rage, he suddenly lost all control of himself, raised his gun and pulled trigger. The gun roared. Bosschere's eyes seemed about to start from his head. He strained against his bonds, groaning. Blood welled from his throat and mouth, and his huge, gross body went limp. Hammond fired a second time. A rattling sound came from Bosschere's thick throat, then his head fell to one side.

"Now you've done it," Grant snapped. "Why in hell couldn't you hold off?"

"Damn him, anyway," Hammond snarled, his eyes gleaming with fury. He raised his gun for a third shot.

"Pull yourself together, Gage!" Grant warned. "Have you gone insane? We've got to be leaving here before some of Bosschere's friends gang up on us. Quick, look around. Maybe we can find some diamonds or money."

Thus urged, Hammond regained his senses. Drawers were jerked from tables and chests. The room was turned topsy-turvy inside a minute. Grant found a small roll of bills amounting to about two hundred dollars. Powder smoke was drifting through the room and outside a few excited voices could be heard. Grant swore, wondering where Bosschere kept the diamonds.

"I reckon that Dolores girl took them with her," Hammond said bitterly. "I remember, now, that she was carrying a small velvet bag when she left. Damn the luck!"

"C'mon," Grant urged. "We've got to get out of here."

CASTING a last glance at the huge body in the chair, the two men leaped for the door, jerked it open, ran to their waiting horses. They bounded into saddles and turned the animals toward the Border. A few Mexicans standing about, quickly leaped to one side to let them pass. A female form detached itself from the group and ran into Bosschere's house. It was Dolores.

Hammond and Grant were a hundred yards along the trail and riding like fury when the sound of a shrill scream reached their ears from Bosschere's house. Then there were more loud cries and a few scattered shots roared aimlessly above their heads.

"Dolores has found her dead meal-ticket, I reckon," Grant yelled across to his companion.

"Curse that girl! She's got the diamonds."

"Maybe she's earned them," Grant called back philosophically. "C'mon, forget 'em. We've got to reach the Border."

They pounded on for another three miles before pulling rein to listen for sounds of pursuit. Finally Grant shook his head. "We're in the clear," he said. "I didn't think they'd chase us, but I wasn't sure. Dang it, Gage! What did you have to kill Bosschere for? We could have used him to trap Crockett."

Hammond nodded reluctantly. "I know. I lost my temper. I should have had more sense. And now we'll

have to find somebody else to furnish diamonds and dope. I admit I made a fool move here."

"Anyway, we're certain now who held up the stage."

"Lot of good that will do us," Hammond growled. "We still can't produce proof. Our proof's dead. There's just one thing, though, Spanish."

"What's that?"

"We've got to get rid of Crockett. He's been trouble enough."

"You're right. He has to go."

"I figure you're the man to do it," Hammond stated.

"You mean you want me to pick a fight with him and rub him out?" asked Grant.

"That's the idea. Are you game to try it?"

"I'm game to do it," Grant snapped. "I always did want a shot at Crockett. I'll welcome the chance."

"We'll talk over details later. Come on, Spanish, we'd better be pushing on."

The two men spurred their ponies into motion and moved off through the darkness.

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CHAPTER XX

ROARING 45S

IT was about noon when Larry rode into Vista Wells, the following day. He stopped first at the Warbonnet Saloon. Entering, he saw Nick Vulean standing among the other customers at the bar.

"Come on and have a drink," Nick invited.

"Thanks." And to the bartender, "Small beer, Whitey." The drink was set out. Larry stood sipping it. "What brings you in here?" Vulean asked.

"Nothing in particular. Seen Sheriff John?"

"What you want the sheriff for?"

Larry grinned. "Do I have to tell you everything?"

"You don't have to," Vulean growled good-naturedly, "but I wish I could make you. There's a hell of a lot should be cleared up between you and me, Larry. You know, I sort of think we could be good friends, if you'd throw away that tin cup of yours and make a living in some way I could understand."

"I've been thinking of doing something like that," Larry admitted.

"You're on the right track. Come on, confession is good for the soul, my boy. Get it offn your mind and you and I can start from scratch."

"You'll forgive me all my crimes, eh?" Larry laughed.

"Sure, I will. But there's a little

matter of a stage holdup that the law might not forgive."

"In other words, anything I say may be used against me," Larry chuckled.

"Gosh, cowboy," Vulcan said sincerely, "I wish it could be otherwise. On second thought, you'd better not do any confessing. I'm feeling right friendly toward you this morning, an' I'd hate to have that feeling disturbed."

"Any particular reason for said feeling?" Larry inquired curiously.

"Maybe it's reaction from Hammond's running off at the head," answered Vulcan.

"Hammond in town this morning?"

"Him and Grant both. They been cursing you plenty, boy. What you done to 'em now?"

"You looking for information or just asking?"

Vulcan yawned lazily. "Put it down to just my idle curiosity."

"Naturally you're not really interested," Larry grinned.

"Not at all, not at all," Vulcan joked back. "Only they acted like they had some new grievance against you."

"I can't think of anything *new* I might have done to offend 'em," Larry said. "What did they have to say?"

"Wanted me to arrest you for holding up the stage. Hammond insisted he had actual proof. I asked him to produce it. He claims that the man who told him you were guilty, died suddenly."

Larry laughed. "I remember I had proof of the Circle H running off my cattle and killing two of my men, but no one would believe me. My proof had died suddenly, too."

"So you told me," Vulcan said dryly. "You and Hammond both

seem to be out of luck. I questioned him some, but that was all he would say. I had a feeling he'd liked to have talked more, except that any statement he made might have implicated himself. Anyhow, he seemed plumb certain he was going to tie the deadwood on you—one way or another."

Larry looked thoughtful. "Thanks for the warning, Nick. Maybe I'd better be on my guard."

DID I say I was warning you of anything?" Vulcan asked carelessly. "You got me wrong, Larry. As a representative of the law, I wouldn't dare take sides in any argument that might come up. It's my duty to be neutral until I learn one party or the other is guilty. But Hammond and Grant are brewing some sort of bad medicine. Grant has a right nasty tongue this morning. He sort of hinted that I wasn't doing my duty by not arresting you and looking for proof afterward. The man might need killing, sooner or later. If I hadn't had a badge on, I'd have been inclined to call him to a showdown. But, like I say, I have to be neutral and give him the benefit of the doubt. I can't let my own feelings come into the matter."

"That's a right long speech you're indulging in," Larry remarked. "What you getting at?"

"Nothing, nothing at all," Vulcan said lazily. "I'm just telling you that Grant is making threats, though I wa'n't supposed to hear 'em. Naturally if I heard of a fight brewing, I'd have to break it up, so I don't want to *hear* of you getting in any trouble." He paused. "I notice Grant packs two guns. You only got one."

"I've got an extra belt and gun,"

Larry said, amused at Vulcan's manner. "Don't see any particular reason for wearing two all the time."

"Some folks don't," Vulcan nodded idly. "Me, I like a balanced weight on both sides, generally. I think you would, too, if you got used to it. Try it, why don't you? Here—" Vulcan paused and slipped a gun out of his holster and shoved it in the waistband of Larry's overalls. "Carry that for a spell. See if you don't like the idea. I'll get it later. Well, I reckon the noon stage is in with the mail by this time. I'm going to head down toward the post-office." He slapped his hat over one eye and strolled from the saloon.

"In other words," Larry mused, gazing after the law officer, "there's trouble afoot, and Nick is giving me a clear field." He turned back to his drink, only half hearing the voices of the other customers at the bar.

TEN minutes drifted past. Men entered the Warbonnet, nodded to Larry and took up positions at the bar. From their conversation, Larry knew the noon stage had arrived. He expected to see Vulcan return, but the lawman didn't put in an appearance. Glancing into the mirror behind the bar, Larry saw Hammond and Spanish Grant enter.

Grant was carrying his ivory-butted six-shooters well forward today. Larry noticed their faces light up as they spotted him at the bar. He tensed as they took up a position on either side of him and asked for drinks.

"H're you, Crockett?" Hammond said more pleasantly than usual.

"Finer'n frog's hair," Larry answered. He wondered what was up.

Hammond and Grant got their drinks and the bartender moved

away to take care of other customers.

"Been down in Caserio lately, Crockett?" Grant asked idly.

This was leading up to something. "Why you asking that?" Larry countered.

"I was wondering," Grant went on, "if you'd heard of the death of an old friend—Anatole Bosschere. He died very suddenly. And he talked plenty before he died."

The three were keeping their voices low. No one else in the saloon could hear the conversation. Hammond added, "Bosschere was a dirty double-crosser. He had a great deal to regret before he kicked off."

So that was it, Larry mused, his mind racing. They'd finally caught up with Bosschere. And Bosschere had talked before they killed him. This was a showdown.

Larry smiled easily. "I'd never call Bosschere a *friend* of mine. We had some connections." He laughed suddenly at Hammond's stormy expression, adding, "Very profitable connections."

Hammond's face grew red. He opened his mouth to curse, but Grant was talking to Larry again. So you can forget your Spanish accent, Crockett. You won't have any reason for using it down near Caserio any more. I've got a hunch you won't be going there, any more—there or any place else unless it's far, far away from Vista Wells. That's one chance I give you, Crockett. I'm giving you until sundown to leave town. Otherwise I shoot you like a dog."

"And of course," Larry smiled, "you know damned well I won't leave town."

Grant nodded with satisfaction. "I expected that. You know what that means."

"I suppose you'll turn me over to the Mex authorities for holding folks

up," Larry said mockingly. He knew Hammond wouldn't dare do that, lest his smuggling activities be revealed. "Or perhaps, Hammond, I might tell what I know. Let's both confess."

Hammond went white with anger. "Why damn you—" he exploded.

"Keep still, Gage," Grant cut in. "I'll handle this."

Larry couldn't resist the temptation to taunt Grant. "You theenk you can handle heem, Señor Grant?" he inquired, with a broad grin. "I'm wonder if you are the capable of handle onytheeng! The night before las', you are fall down on the job ver' bad, no? You should be more careful—"

"Damn you!" Grant lashed out, losing his temper. His hands moved toward gun butts.

HOLD it," Larry chuckled, raising his hands in the air. "You don't want to shoot now, Grant. Not while my hands are up. Too many people are watching you."

It was a bold chance to take, but Larry had felt quite certain Grant wouldn't go through with the draw.

"Not now, Spanish!" Hammond said quickly.

By this time the attention of others in the saloon had been attracted. They couldn't hear what

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was being said, but they had seen Larry raise his hands before Grant. The men at the bar began to back away. Apparently Crockett didn't want a fight, but you could never tell. There might be trouble yet.

Grant removed his hands from his guns, and took a step closer to Larry. "By hell, if you'd only fight I'd blast you to hell," he spoke through gritted teeth.

"Maybe I will," Larry said coolly. He had accomplished his purpose: stalled off action until the attention of others in the saloon was attracted. Larry knew there was no avoiding a fight, but he wanted plenty of witnesses to swear he hadn't forced the issue. He said again, "Maybe I will, Grant, but first I figure to go find Nick Vulcan and mention certain smuggling activities that have been going on—"

Hammond paled. "You wouldn't dare! If you do that, I'll tell Vulcan who held up the stagecoach." He smiled suddenly, confident he had Larry stopped.

"Oh, wouldn't I?" Larry smiled bleakly. "You just watch me." Abruptly, he turned away, and started toward the door.

The move was so unexpected that it threw Hammond and Grant into confusion. That was what Larry desired. They didn't have time to think. Hammond jerked out an angry, "Now, Spanish!" which was exactly the order Larry had been waiting to hear.

Spinning on his heel, Larry swung completely around just in time to see Spanish Grant's hands darting to hips. After that it was all a blur of action and powder smoke and roaring .45s.

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